DESIGNER AND MODERNIST

THE IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF LINEN DESIGN ON THE WORK OF COLIN MIDDLETON

One volume

DICKON HALL

School of Art and Design of Ulster University

Ph.D.

March 2019

I confirm that the word count of this thesis is less than 100,000 words.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Karen Fleming and Dr Joseph McBrinn, for their support, advice and encouragement throughout the research and writing of this PhD thesis, as well as Dr Justin Magee and many other staff at Ulster University for their guidance and assistance at every stage.

I am very grateful to Kim Mawhinney for giving me such generous access to the Colin Middleton Archive held by NMNI and also to their collection of his works, and to her colleagues at the Ulster Museum, Anne Stewart, Anna Liesching and Mary Dornan, who have been so helpful. I would also like to acknowledge the Deputy Keeper of the Records, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland. Many other people have kindly assisted with my research in various ways and I would like to thank them and to apologise to any whom I have inadvertently left out: Nelson Bell, Terry Boyd, John Breakey, David Britton and Karen Reihill, Anne de Buck, Chris Caldwell, Professor Mike Catto, Dr Riann Coulter, David Foster, Dr Brian Kennedy, Sean Kissane, Dr Paul Larmour, David Lennon, Linda Logue, Emer Lynch, Eamonn Mallie, Charlie Minter, Shelagh Parkes, Dr Jackie Reilly, Alison Smith, Claire Walsh and Ian Whyte. I would also like to thank the many private collectors who have allowed me to see paintings and drawings by Colin Middleton over many years. Ailie O'Hagan designed the timeline for this thesis and I very much appreciate all the time she has taken with this at various stages.

Jane Middleton Giddens, Colin Middleton's daughter, has been invaluable with her help and advice throughout many years of researching and writing about her father's life and work, and I am immensely grateful to Jane for all that she has made possible.

I would also like to that the Department for Employment and Learning, whose funding has made this research possible.

ABSTRACT

Colin Middleton (1910-1983) was regarded as one of the most significant painters working in Ireland throughout his career, yet the assessment of his reputation is now confused and problematic. Middleton's unique characteristics as a painter and his complex development throughout a long career have not been easy to place within histories of Irish art and as a result he has become a more peripheral figure.

This thesis aims to counter certain critical perceptions of Colin Middleton and to provide a more appropriate and accurate context for his work. Central to this is the construction of a detailed biography, within which I have given prominence to the environment of his youth in late industrial Belfast. This is crucial in understanding the relationship between his training and work as a designer within the linen industry and his continuing development as a painter. It also demonstrates the need for a reassessment of the history of art in Ulster, including its relationship to industrial development, as well as to indigenous cultural traditions and contemporary art in Britain and Ireland.

By bringing together a detailed analysis of primary and secondary material with a wide-ranging examination of his work, I assert the centrality of Middleton's position within Ireland as a painter whose work responds to many aspects of the society in which he lived. I will be looking at significant figures within Middleton's life, such as John Hewitt, John Middleton Murry and Victor Waddington, as well as artists who were his contemporaries such as John Luke, Nevill Johnson and Daniel O'Neill.

I intend to demonstrate the unity of his work across his career and to present the coherence in his development by explaining the personal motivations that drove changes in style and subject matter. In particular, I will connect these to the enduring dialectic between Middleton's changing creative personalities as a designer and as an artist, analysing his achievement as a modernist painter working in a provincial location throughout the twentieth century.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACNI	Arts Council of Northern Ireland
BMAG	Belfast Museum and Art Gallery
CEMA	Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts
CM	Colin Middleton (in timeline)
IELA	Irish Exhibition of Living Art
IMMA	Irish Museum of Modern Art
KM	Kathleen Middleton (in timeline)
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
RHA	Royal Hibernian Academy
RUA	Royal Ulster Academy
UAA	Ulster Academy of Arts
UU	Ulster University

INTRODUCTION

0.1

Colin Middleton (1910-1983) is widely accepted as one of the most significant painters working in Ireland during the twentieth century. In 1954 the Dublin critic Edward Sheehy wrote in *The Studio*, "Within the past five years Colin Middleton has established himself as one of the foremost of contemporary Irish painters"[1] and more than thirty years later the poet and curator John Hewitt (1907-1987) described him as "one of Ireland's few painters of stature".[2] In relation to his contemporaries, S.B. Kennedy judged that he "was the most important of the group of Northern artists who came to prominence at the Living Art exhibitions".[3] Yet critical assessments of his work and his place within a history of Irish art have struggled to identify the unity of his achievement and therefore to accord him an appropriate place within this canon. It is natural that most writers on Middleton's work approach him by addressing the range of his work and the diversity of styles within which he worked across fifty years. Bruce Arnold described him as remaining "richly diverse in his approach to his art"[4] in a review of a 1968 exhibition, and S.B. Kennedy, continuing a balanced assessment, noted his versatility and his "adoption of external influences", asking whether "at each stage of his development he refused to consolidate his achievement"?[5]

Middleton occupied an unusual and perhaps unique place within Irish art history, closely associated with the emergence during the 1930s of a group of modernist artists working in Northern Ireland in a manner closely associated with contemporary English theory and practice, before becoming more aligned with a traditionally Dublin-based perspective on developments in Ireland in the post-war period, during the period of six years when he exhibited with the Victor Waddington Galleries as part of a loosely defined group of Irish painters. Between the 1960s and his death in 1983, despite

[1] Sheehy, Edward, 'Colin Middleton', *The Studio*, 1954, p.74
[2] Hewitt, John, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976, p. 26
[3] Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism*, Institute of Irish Studies, Q.U.B., Belfast, 1991, p.128
[4] Arnold, Bruce, 'Diversity of Colin Middleton', *Sunday Independent*, December 1968
[5] *Irish Art and Modernism*, p.129

continuing to exhibit regularly in Dublin, Middleton became once more predominantly associated with Northern Ireland, re-establishing a problematic national reputation while, conversely, becoming as an artist an increasingly individual and isolated figure. This position is perhaps best demonstrated by the auction of the contents of Middleton's studio held in London by Christie's two years after his death, which was first previewed in Belfast and Dublin, demonstrating the extent of his popularity and reputation as well as the lack of a specific sense of where he and his work belong.

The dialogue between Middleton's art and that of his contemporaries and near contemporaries in Ireland, Britain and Europe is often the prism through which critics have approached him, but Middleton's own dialogue with himself, that between the painter and the designer, has been largely neglected, despite its significance and the role it had in shaping his work.

Middleton worked for twenty years as a damask designer in a small partnership his father had set up in the early years of the twentieth century with Hugh Page. The training and work that occupied him between 1927, when he left school, and 1947, when he left Northern Ireland predominantly in an attempt to make a new start away from design, had complex and often ambivalent or contradictory effects on his life. Middleton himself appears to have been conscious early in his working life of what one might call these two creative identities, the artist and the designer, as well as the dialectic that they established. This dialectic is arguably more crucial to Middleton's development as a painter than his awareness of other artists and his position amongst his contemporaries, yet it has not been examined in any detail in relation to the broader context of his work. In driving the evolution of his work even decades after he had stopped working as a designer, arguably it remains central to understanding the reasons for the diversity that has often become a barrier to accepting his achievement.

An analysis of the literature concentrating on Colin Middleton and Irish art in the period during which he worked often raises additional issues, some of which cross over into parallel fields of cultural enquiry. While pure art historical writing on Middleton has been limited and on occasions misdirected by incorrect or restricted factual knowledge, it is also important to note that the various fields of study that would provide a more complete sense of his role and significance are in some cases only

beginning to be explored. For example the widely accepted canon of modern Irish art pays perhaps insufficient attention to the construction of a distinct Northern Irish cultural identity in the mid-twentieth century or of the problematic 'provincial' status of the modernist artist in Northern Ireland at that time. Equally the broader social and economic context of industrial Belfast has rarely been applied to the artists working in the city or to its unusually coherent vision of connections between fine and applied art during that period. Ideas of class and gender emerge naturally from such analysis and could assist in understanding Northern Ireland's unique place within modern artistic traditions in both Ireland and Britain.

Through a complete and accurate study of Middleton's art and his life we can understand more clearly the nature of the social, cultural and artistic environment, both locally and internationally, from which he emerged, and see how his work represents a substantial, serious and indefatigable response to this environment and to the changing problems of working as an artist with it.

0.2

In 1968 the Irish Times critic wrote in a review of a new exhibition of Middleton's work in Dublin, 'In the early and middle fifties he was widely felt to be the leading artist in the country after Jack Yeats';[6] three years earlier in the same newspaper Brian Fallon wrote that 'About a decade ago Colin Middleton looked possibly the strongest talent to emerge in Irish painting in the last twenty years'[7].

It is interesting to move from this to the analysis of his work in the broad surveys of Irish art that began to be published in the 1970s and 1980s. The result of a number of such books published in the later decades of the twentieth century in many cases was essentially to form or confirm a canon of late nineteenth and twentieth century Irish art, to provide a sense of sequential progress and to iterate the significance of certain

[6] *Irish Times*, 2 December 1968
[7] Fallon, Brian, 'Recent Paintings by Colin Middleton, *Irish Times*, 3 December 1965

places at certain periods that either mirrored or mimicked the formation of a European modernist canon. In addition some writers sought to create a more international context for Irish artists. The development of a specific national cultural identity related to the establishment of the Irish Free State (and later the Irish Republic) was also significant within the development of this art history. While one might expect a political and historical awareness around the canon, it is important to note also the emphasis it often also gives to connections between certain artists and the role of key commercial galleries and dealers, as well as collectors, at various stages.

Colin Middleton exhibited regularly between 1931 and 1982, the year before he died. His first solo exhibition was held in 1943 when, remarkably, he was given the first solo exhibition at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery on its re-opening after the Blitz, also becoming the first contemporary local artist to have an exhibition there. On average there were about eight solo exhibitions of Middleton's work held every decade between the 1950s and the 1970s, in a prestigious series of commercial and public venues.

From the later 1940s until his death in 1983 Middleton exhibited in the best-regarded private galleries in Ireland; initially at the Victor Waddington Galleries, then later with David Hendriks in Dublin, as well as the Magee Gallery, Tom Caldwell Gallery and McClelland Galleries in Belfast. In London he showed regularly but for a short period with the Tooth Gallery. A second exhibition took place at Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in 1954, as well as numerous solo exhibitions with the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts and its successor, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, from 1945 to 1976. These included tours to venues such as the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery in Dublin and the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh. Two two-man exhibitions were held at the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry and the Westgate Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1968 and 1970 respectively. Further afield, Middleton's work was shown in Australia in 1944, in Sweden and Holland during the early 1950s, and in a touring exhibition, 'New Irish Painters', organised by the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art in 1950, that also went to museums in Baltimore, Cleveland, Delaware, Louisville and Toledo.

Therefore there exists an extensive, well-catalogued and much discussed and reviewed body of his work, a large proportion of which has survived (apart from much of his painting from the 1930s, which he appears to have destroyed). Most of Middleton's exhibitions were held at leading private or public galleries which produced lists or catalogues of the work shown, while these were usually reviewed by critics from leading local newspapers and periodicals.

This immediately confers a definite stature on Colin Middleton as an independent artist with a career that does not follow a trajectory similar to any of his contemporaries. Yet in the majority of these early surveys of modern Irish art he is placed in the context of a group of artists who exhibited at the Waddington Galleries in the late 1940s and 1950s, all of whom had met while living in Northern Ireland, such as Daniel O'Neill (1920-1974), Gerard Dillon (1916-1971), George Campbell (1917-1979) and Nevill Johnson (1911-1999) (occasionally Dublin contemporaries such as Louis le Brocquy (1916-2012) and Thurloe Conolly (1918-2016) are also included), with whom he did not necessarily have a great deal in common and most of whom were not particularly close to him, even if they were to each other.[8] John Luke (1906-1975) is also included in this list on occasions, and Hewitt regularly paired the two, although Luke never became a regular exhibitor in Dublin. Brian Fallon in *Irish Art 1830-1990* discussed Middleton in a paragraph, in which he was placed between Daniel O'Neill and George Campbell. Bruce Arnold in *Irish Art: A Concise History*, revised in 1977 from the first edition which in 1969 was a pioneer in its broad analysis of Irish art, devoted a paragraph to Middleton, discussing him alongside O'Neill and the slightly younger T.P. Flanagan (1929-2011), both of whom were at times close to him. James Christen Steward connects his interest in Surrealism with the Dublin painter Patrick Hennessy (1915-1980),[9] as also does Colm Toibin, also linking their depiction of 'isolated figures in a dream landscape' with Louis le Brocquy.[10] Mike Catto gives a different historical emphasis to the connection

[8] Middleton exhibited with Johnson, O'Neill, Campbell and Dillon in an informal exhibition in 1944. He seems to have known Nevill Johnson in the 1930s and they were certainly on generally friendly terms during the 1940s and early 1950s but do not seem to have been particularly close. In the late 1940s Middleton and O'Neill became friends and were close until the early 1950s, but there is no evidence of any similar relationship between him and George Campbell or Gerard Dillon.

[9] Steward, James Christen, 'The Irishness of Irish Painting', *When Time Began to Rant and Rage*, Merrell Holberton, London, p.21

[10] Toibin, Colm, 'Public, private and a National Spirit', Ibid., p.27

between this group by pointing out that the majority of its members were separated from many modern Ulster artists in lacking a formal art education (some did benefit from part-time study).

The Moderns, an ambitious and wide-ranging exhibition held at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in 2010-11 that attempted to provide an overall shape to the development of Irish art across the twentieth century, again presented Middleton through a focus on work from a specific time period, in this case the early 1940s. This necessarily limited the sense of his own engagement with modernist practice or his broader position within Irish and Northern Irish art. The installation of the exhibition also presented much of the art made in Northern Ireland in the mid-twentieth century as largely separate from the main Irish canon, sharing certain local qualities of production but perhaps not connected by any coherent social or political force. In *Irish Art and Modernism* (1991), an unusually wide-ranging survey of Irish art, S.B. Kennedy offered a more detailed analysis of Middleton's work up to the mid-1950s and clarifies in many ways the complexity of his relationship to European and British modernism, his unique place amongst his Irish contemporaries and the role he played as the precursor of several modernist modes of working within Irish art.

The judgement of all these writers in slightly different forms is shaped by the range of styles in which Middleton worked throughout his career. Aidan Dunne in the catalogue for *The Moderns* describes Middleton as a 'technically adept chameleon, who seemed to shuffle through artistic movements without ever being quite convinced by any one of them'.[11] Kenneth McConkey sees his work as a 'barometer of taste'.[12] Brian Fallon wrote that the "steady quest for a personal language apparently did not interest him and he preferred to work as an impulsive eclectic, picking up any style which interested him and filling it with his own very Northern personality."[13]

It is relevant in considering the critical response to Middleton to analyse the concept of there being a single 'Northern personality', but Fallon's description of Middleton's

[11] Dunne, Aidan, 'The Moderns', *The Moderns*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010, p.112
[12] McConkey, Kenneth, *A Free Spirit – Irish Art, 1880-1960*, Antique Collectors' Club and Pyms Gallery, London, 1990, p.81
[13] Fallon, Brian, *Irish Art 1830-1990*, Appletree Press, Belfast, 1994, p.170

manner of working appears in this case to be related to a particular period or exhibition, rather than a response to the totality of his career. Bruce Arnold also focuses on Middleton continuing to 'experiment with style and technique throughout his development as a painter', although he is more sympathetic to the seriousness of the artist, concluding that each 'period'…displays great technical ability and a profound understanding of the unchanging material which forms the inspiration for his art'.[14]

S.B. Kennedy's more detailed analysis puts forward more contemporary writing on his work but feels overall that 'there is something less than convincing about Middleton' and, interestingly, he raises the idea that Middleton's training as a damask designer meant that he 'emphasised the technical aspect of painting', suggesting that perhaps "he was in love with his materials".[15] The connection Kennedy makes between Middleton's painting and his design is important, and while it was only peripheral to his assessment of his role within Irish modernism, I intend to consider it in depth in relation to Colin Middleton's career and to examine how closely this dialectic might relate to the development of his work.

The general treatment of Middleton that has led to this critical consensus raises a number of key questions, which begin to indicate lacunae within the broad written history of Irish art as well as the necessity of approaching significant figures such as Middleton on their own terms and with a more complete and accurate biographical knowledge than has been presented to date. For example, did the critical response to Middleton's work appear to begin to change in the 1960s and why might this have been the case? Does Middleton appear to be judged at times by particularly unfavourable criteria compared to other Irish artists working in the twentieth century? To what extent has he been affected by the concentration of the Irish canon around the art and the social agenda of post-independence Ireland? Is there a need for a separate history and canon of art in Ulster to be assessed?

Curiously, Middleton's place in the Irish canon has become both secure and increasingly limited. He is certainly present in almost every serious survey of the period,

---

[14] Arnold, Bruce, *Irish Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, p.160-161
[15] *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*, p.130

but the selection of works that is made, which often tends to result in a concentration on a single aspect of his art that is most relevant to the writer in question, can present Middleton as he fits best within the particular viewpoint and argument of each work. It might appear that we are looking at a different painter on every occasion, exaggerating these changes of style and making them additionally problematic, presenting a barrier to any further analysis or understanding.

A shift in critical writing on Middleton appears to begin in the early 1960s and has an interesting relationship to the events of his life and exhibiting career. Most of these critics are Dublin-based, but as Northern Irish writers have approached him in a broadly similar way, this is not necessarily relevant. In contrast, the fluidity of judgements and the lack of any canonical hierarchy in the 1940s and 1950s ensured a very direct critical response to Middleton's work during this period, treating him almost always as an individual figure without a defining local context. Perhaps in part because they had not grown up with the same sense of Northern Ireland as 'other', writers such as Edward Sheehy approached Middleton on his own terms and also in the light of a responsive relationship to contemporary art outside Ireland and the contemporary world beyond, although it is notable that James White wrote of a distinct 'northern way of seeing'[16] in 1950 and in the following year claimed that Middleton and Daniel O'Neill had been influenced by Jack Yeats, placing them in a Dublin tradition that Middleton, certainly, would have questioned.[17] For younger writers, who had grown up after partition, there existed a particular construction of the north, as well as an increasing enthusiasm to define a canon of modern Irish art and also sufficient historical context within the twentieth century to achieve this. Northern Ireland's complex and unique nature was difficult to absorb within it, despite the interest these writers often demonstrated in individual artists.

Many of these texts served to establish an Irish visual identity that can stand alongside a broader cultural identity and to assert an independent line of development within that, a separate, re-invented national artistic tradition that reinforced the sense of transformation that had occurred politically and socially in Ireland during the twentieth

[16] White, James, 'Irish Painters of Today', *The Studio*, March 1950
[17] White, James, 'The Visual Arts in Ireland', *Blackfriars*, February 1951, Volume 32, Issue 371, p.70-74

century. This required a clear and iconographically consistent imagery, often promoting works with a political ideology parallel to that of the State. The idea of a 'virtuous tradition' identified by certain subjects that seem intrinsically and clearly Irish is separated by James Christen Steward from the uncertainty of mid-century artists such as Middleton, so that the re-emergence of the 'heroism of Irish painting and Irish history' occurs with le Brocquy, Robert Ballagh and Micheal Farrell in the 1960s.[18]

While this agenda was unimportant to those writing about Middleton's work in the 1940s and 1950s, who had actually been making assessments of his painting at the time when it was changing most swiftly and radically, without finding these changes confusing, by the mid-1960s the complexity of Middleton's work and, perhaps, his lack of interest in remaining within a particular trope of national identity appears at least partly to lie at the root of his gradual marginalisation from the main Irish canon. The changes within Middleton's work do not provide the consistency required by those writers who are trying to establish a canon based on shared national concerns that often cross from art to broader cultural, historical and political concerns. This marginalisation is on two fronts: an overall lack of seriousness deduced from his refusal to remain fixed within the same style, and also an increasing definition of Middleton through the prism of an Ulster heritage that is not necessarily consistent with the particular history of Northern Irish art.

These conflate within some writing, where the hegemonic construct of a Protestant Northern Irish cultural identity is at times aligned with the same forces and qualities that defined the country's industrial heritage. These are often defined in ways that might be seen as limiting; in the case of Middleton a connection is often made to the variety within his work, predominantly through the technical facility and copyist's skills that he learnt as a damask designer, and it is allowed to become the defining factor within his art. In addition, this variety has at times been exaggerated by the mis-dating of works or left unexplained by a limited or inaccurate explanation of the facts of his life. This interlinked construction has contributed to his positioning in a peripheral role, outside a pure modernist canon and on the fringes of the Irish canon.

[18] 'The Irishness of Irish Painting', p.21

The specifically Northern Irish qualities at times ascribed to Middleton's character and work in this way arguably take on certain intrinsically negative connotations. This is rarely straightforward, however, and we might, for example, consider Fallon's description of a 'very Northern personality' as a broader reference to a northern European tradition with which Middleton himself claimed kinship, although it is not clear if this is his meaning. Fallon also wrote of recent paintings in a 1965 exhibition by Colin Middleton at the Hendriks Gallery as 'hedged about with a dry, typical Northern bleakness and reserve'. While allowing him a 'subtle austerity' he continues:

> The reverse of these Northern virtues are of course the characteristic vices – frequent dullness of colour, a starved and stingy quality – over-rigid symmetry, a lack of charm…his restraint is a Puritan affair…[19]

This emphasis is also noticeable at times in writing on other Northern Irish artists who had emerged from early twentieth century industrial Ulster. Frances Ruane described John Luke's (1906-1975) brightly coloured and inventively stylised *The Lock at Edenderry* as 'a concise expression of a clipped northern orderliness'[20]. Fionna Barber, who has assessed modern art in Ulster within a number of significant and illuminating contexts, positions John Luke's work in the demanding technique of tempera as related to 'the diligence and industry underpinning the formation of Ulster Protestantism'[21], which is certainly an important point, although one might also look to his interest in the Early Renaissance and his awareness of the resurgence of tempera painting amongst contemporary figures such as Maxwell Armfield (1881-1972) and Thomas Monnington (1902-1976), who had studied at the Slade only a few years before Luke's own arrival there.

Luke and Middleton were, according to Barber, of interest to John Hewitt because he identified their work with the 'values of industry'. Introducing this consideration of the role of industry within the life and work of both Luke and Middleton, as well as of other Northern Irish artists of the period, is necessary and relevant, but it is a fluid and complex influence. Hewitt did acknowledge his appreciation that both artists 'describe

---

[19] Fallon, Brian, *Irish Times* 3 December 1965
[20] Ruane, Frances, 'The Collection Moves Forward', *AIB Art 2*, AIB Group, Dublin, 2002, p.6
[21] Barber, Fionna, *Art in Ireland Since 1910*, Reaktion Books, London 2013, p.81

their forms exactly, clearly; both handle their pigments with ease and obvious certainty' but he makes clear that he was struck by Middleton's internationalism and the radical vision of his art within the conservative art world of Belfast in the 1930s and 1940s.

This is not to underestimate the problems in maintaining such a complex issue within a broader Irish identity. The official assertion of a 'united and homogenous protestant state'[22] within Northern Irish culture, consistent with the claim during the 1951 Festival of Britain that 'we stand at the end of a hundred years of remarkable progress, the speed and quality of which have been specially marked since we received a substantial measure of self-government 30 years ago'[23], undoubtedly contributed to such a perception. It is this identity that seems at times to dominate the critical assessment of artists of Middleton's generation, whereas his contemporaries such as John Hewitt and Sam Hanna Bell were intent on 'blurring the edges of identity' and depicting diversity to support 'the concept of a Northern Irish people with a unique culture and identity',[24] despite the occasional presentation of stereotypes within their work. Gillian McIntosh identifies in this period a discourse of 'political dissent coming more and more to include creative endeavour',[25] within which Colin Middleton would surely have included himself, expressing his partial alienation from the official Northern Irish identity as well as the broader sense of otherness to which art and culture might provide a counterbalance within Northern Ireland.

It is interesting to consider this in the context of Fintan Cullen's description of the 'concentration on difference'[26] in visual representations of Ireland and the Irish, and to expand his idea that the 'development of Englishness depended on the negation of Irishness[27]' to a parallel suggestion that perhaps at this critical period of modern Irish history the actual development of 'Irishness' required a clear separation from a

[22] McIntosh, Gillian, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth-Century Ireland*, Cork University Press, 1999, p.3
[23] Sir Roland Nugent, quoted in *The Force of Culture*, p.106
[24] *The Force of Culture*, p.195
[25] Ibid., p.197
[26] Cullen, Fintan, *Visual Politics: The Representation of Ireland 1750-1930*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1997, p.10
[27] Ibid., p.11

northern, predominantly Protestant identity. The expression of colonialism within visual art that Cullen discusses could also take the form of an analysis of art that conflates the social, political and cultural. There is an ambiguity in much Irish writing around the acceptance of a border and the existence of Northern Ireland as a separate country which is mirrored in the uncertainty over whether Northern Irish art should be included within the history of Irish art and how it should be represented, the result of which is that it often remains peripheral or is excluded.

One can read the presentation of a broader cultural and political identity in analysing why Middleton has often come to be presented, and arguably peripheralised, as a mechanically skilled craftsman of exceptional quality whose vision is restricted by technical concerns and whose industrially-acquired training express a dour mentality and a designer's facility in mimicking other artists. This is consistent, as Nancy Troy points out, with 'the fact that for most of the twentieth century modernist discourse has consistently maintained a distinction between high art and the decorative arts, embracing the former while keeping the latter at a distance'.[28]

His background and training as a damask designer are used to further position him in this way; in fact, Middleton's complex attitudes towards linen design and its impact on him as an artist, as well as the changing relationship of art and design within the British and European avant-garde, all created a number of interesting dialogues within his work that go almost wholly unexplored by critics but that actually push him into a much more mainstream position within modern British art and also within the Irish canon.

0.3

The linen industry in Northern Ireland, the powerful shaping force of the city in which Middleton was brought up and in which he lived, has not been given its place in trying to understand his work. Middleton was very much a product of his time and his world.

[28] Troy, Nancy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991, p.1

He grew up in a very specific environment, born around the high point of Belfast's industrial achievement and expansion. His parents were English, drawn to Ulster by the work available in the linen industry within which his father, who had trained at Manchester School of Art and remained a keen amateur painter, worked as a damask designer.

The city Middleton knew in his youth was prosperous in many ways but was also beginning to reveal many of the problems that its growth had brought about or made worse. Poverty, sectarianism and gender inequality were rife. While many British and European designers and artists had been brought to Ulster by its burgeoning linen industry it remained culturally provincial, with little opportunity to engage with modern theories and ideas around design. Belfast's own Government School of Art, which became part of the Municipal Technical Institute in 1901, had provided opportunities for young people from a broad range of backgrounds to train as artists or as skilled artisans and, for some, this training led to careers as artists and art teachers rather than returning to use their skills in local factories and yards. The development in the education of designers and artists in Belfast has been well documented by Mike Catto in *A School of Design for Belfast, 1849-1960* (2009) and he establishes the developing influence of educational opportunities and design reform on the local tradition of art in Ulster and also within the broader context of its shared links with other cities and regions across Britain.

The experience of young artists in Ulster in the early years of the twentieth century would seem to separate further the experience of artists in Ulster from those in the south, as assessed by Fintan Cullen, who sees in the apparently widespread 'appropriation of modernism' by Irish artists at this period a dependence on 'financial security and freedom to travel'.

> The sons and daughters of well-to-do professional Anglo-Irish or…Catholic landed stock, these artists were in a position to take on the new ideas in the French ateliers: they could turn their backs on the minutiae of the national struggle and pursue their careers abroad.[29]

[29] Cullen, Fintan, *Painting the Modern*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1997, p.165

Financial matters were clearly pressing for many of the northern artists who won scholarships to study art in Belfast or London, but it would not be possible to demarcate an artist's engagement with the avant-garde at this time, even if it was gained at second hand, through their social backgrounds. The art institutions and societies in Ulster in the first part of the twentieth century seem generally meritocratic and without significant social division.

Middleton began to work as a damask designer in 1927 while he was attending evening classes and Saturday classes at Belfast School of Art. If he was born at the end of the heyday of the city's Victorian greatness, he began to work in an industry just as it was entering a period of sustained decline. Middleton's interest lay in further training and a career as an artist and he might initially have been encouraged by the increasing closeness of design and art in modernist European and British circles. The 1934 Ulster Unit exhibition and the single exhibition of the Ulster Guild of Artists which took place in the preceding year, demonstrated the relationship between fine art and applied art for many of Middleton's Northern contemporaries, who were keen for their work to be appropriate for the modern home as well as connected to the modern world, in notable distinction to the stronger emphasis on abstraction of their English forerunner, Unit One. Joseph McBrinn records that 'the first Northern Irish "Ideal Home" exhibition' opened in 1933, 'where interior design displays mixed mass-produced and hand-made objects'.[30] The complex significance of crafts in the 1920s and 1930s as being the focus of patronage by 'the elite of Unionist society' as well as 'subtle embodiments of an identity which was essentially "Celtic"',[31] adds interest to their central position within these modernist groupings in Northern Ireland.

These exhibiting groups have been discussed by S.B. Kennedy and Emma McVeigh, while John Hewitt, secretary to the Ulster Unit and author of the catalogue introduction, wrote in 1938:

> Art galleries themselves tend to perpetuate the unnatural divorce which so regretfully occurred in the eighteenth century between the various crafts of

[30] McBrinn, Joseph, 'The Crafts in Twentieth Century Ulster: From Partition to the Festival of Britain, 1922-1951', *Ulster Folklife*, volume 51, 2005, p.59-60
[31] Ibid., p.54

> men. And it is our duty to make clear to the public that Painting and Sculpture are not greatly different in nature from Printing, Weaving, Pottery. The problems of shape, form, pattern and colour occur in these too; and the advantage of the so-called fine arts lies only in their greater adaptability of emotional connection.[32]

Christopher Reed points out that a number of modernist English artistic movements saw a positive use of artistic ability in applied design, without the negative connotations that Middleton's damask designing takes on in the hands of some Irish critics. For example, Henry Moore (1898-1986) and Graham Sutherland (1903-1980) were two of the leading contemporary artists commissioned during the Second World War to make textile designs for scarves by the Czech exile Zika Ascher (1910-1992), and Moore's continuing interest in this aspect of visual creativity in other fabric designs perhaps recalls the early influence on his work of Roger Fry (1866-1934).[33] The broader context within the English avant-garde for this comfortable moving between the two spheres was certainly present; Nikolaus Pevsner's (1902-1983) first research as an academic in England studied the role of the designer within industry and was published in 1937 as *An Inquiry into Industrial Art in England*.

While Pevsner was generally critical of British design standards he was also employed as a buyer of modern textiles for the Gordon Russell furniture showrooms. It was Pevsner who most directly addressed the question that affected so many contemporary artists at that period in his 1945 article 'Can Painters Design Textiles?'.[34] By their continued involvement with design it is clear that artists such as Moore and John Piper (1903-1992) saw no issue with this association, but it is intriguing that the article was published so close to Middleton's decision to leave Northern Ireland in order to leave his design work behind. One might speculate that England maintained a tradition of interchangeability between the roles of artists and designers which Ulster

---

[32] Hewitt, John, 'The Special Problems of a Provincial Gallery', 1938, draft copy in John Hewitt Archive, University of Ulster, Coleraine

[33] Middleton is likely to have also been aware of Fry's writing; John Hewitt mentions in his monograph on Luke that they read Fry's *Vision and Design* and, in addition, Fry was a friend of H.O. Meredith, a professor of economics at Queen's University, Belfast between 1911 and 1945, so he is likely to have been discussed in local circles.

[34] Published in *Harper's Magazine*, November 1945

did not, still having a more fixed understanding of manufacturing and design which Middleton was to question around this time.

It is more likely that this is a social, as much as an aesthetic, issue; unlike his English contemporaries, Colin Middleton had not been able to establish himself as a professional artist before working as a designer. There was little opportunity within Northern Ireland for this to happen, and the professional designer within industry occupied a specific role as an artisan. The enduring issue that this engendered arguably affected critical perception of Middleton throughout his career.

One of the most damaging aspects to a judgement of Middleton as a technician traipsing through modern styles with any serious intent is that it ignores the absolute seriousness of his approach to every aspect of his practice as an artist. The holistic coherence of William Morris' (1834-1896) writings and design was a clear example to him, particularly as political theory and utopianism were important to Middleton and, although it is difficult to know how many of these he was aware of, the Omega Workshops, the Bauhaus, Raoul Dufy's (1877-1953) designs for Paul Poiret, even Mainie Jellett's (1897-1944) rug designs, as well as those discussed in the previous paragraph, all exemplify the interconnections between predominantly abstract art and design theory around the time at which Middleton began to work as a designer.

While the period of Middleton's youth was extraordinary in the variety and complexity of ideas and aesthetics surrounding design and craft, it is clear that he maintained a conscious distance between his work as a designer and as a painter. This is in itself revealing. His correspondence demonstrates his own very radical ideas about the potential application of design within industry (although he was never in a position to put these into practice) but even as a young man in a city where most exhibiting groups were sympathetic to the unity of all forms of art and craft, he seems to have held himself apart from this, although he was probably aware of the aesthetic of contemporary design that had become increasingly aligned to that of modernist art.

Despite this partial alignment and the meaningful decorative element crucial to the increasing abstraction of much late nineteenth and early twentieth century art, Nancy Troy comments that 'for the decorative arts in general…their aim was widely

understood to be the satisfaction of the senses rather than the engagement of the mind. A high art form such as easel painting, on the other hand, was associated with an intellectual tradition and viewed as the appropriate vehicle for the fine arts concerned with the expression of profound truths'.[35] As Middleton begins to engage more clearly with these 'profound truths' in his painting towards the end of the 1930s, he eventually seems to consider a more linear, highly-finished manner of painting unsuitable for this examination and communication and apparently rejects what one might consider the 'designer' within his creative personality. This dialectic, and the dynamic it creates as he moves towards and then away from an attempt to find integration of his two, increasingly distinct, creative identities, provides a very different line of development for Middleton to that which we might expect to see in an artist who had been so involved with the linen industry.

Perhaps this is a feature of the generation to which he belonged, but Middleton does not seem to have found mechanisation a motivational force within his own modernist aesthetic, and in fact it is the impact of this very mechanisation that arguably pushed him towards a more traditionally representational manner of working for a short period. Neither did he hold any nostalgic reverence for the ideal of the designer-craftsman and the essential value of the well-made object, although the interest in truth to materials that might be seen as a partial evolution from this was something that recurs in Middleton's work over a long period. It does, however, take a slightly different form as his interest lies in finding a particularly appropriate way in which a natural object can be transferred onto the canvas, board or sheet, without losing its essential nature.

0.4

Belfast might not have seemed so far removed from the radical innovations of contemporary art in the 1920s and 1930s. Middleton was surrounded by a number of

[35] *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, p.2

sympathetic and ambitious friends as he began to study and exhibit as an artist. The aforementioned standard practice of locating Middleton amongst a group of near contemporaries, Daniel O'Neill, Gerard Dillon and George Campbell in particular, who were all younger and with whom he had little in common as artists, demonstrates the unbalancing influence of Irish art history as it has largely been recorded, in the context of Dublin galleries and exhibiting societies, rather than through association with the artists, groups and cultural figures with whom he was surrounded in his home city.

In fact, as Kenneth McConkey pointed out, even in the decades before partition Belfast, which had been granted city status in 1888, had already been operating as a regional capital, more because of its prosperity and industrial power than its strong Protestant heritage.

> While Georgian Dublin crumbled, Belfast expanded rapidly.[36]

Northern Ireland's artists were more likely to study in London than Dublin and few of them exhibited in the south until after the war. A distinct tradition, arguably as serious in its modernist intentions as anything happening in Dublin, grew up in Belfast in the 1930s; intriguingly these artists were highly sympathetic to broad creative definitions that did not necessarily differentiate between fine art and applied art. Printmaking and particularly wood engraving, a rigorous discipline that might have appealed to the technical skills of trained designers and which was taught at the College of Art, was also popular amongst Belfast artists, including Middleton who made a number of woodcuts and linocuts in the 1930s and early 1940s and provided frontispieces or illustrations for a number of books.[37]

Many histories of Irish art do not mention George MacCann (1909-1967), friend and pupil of Henry Moore, E.M. O'Rorke Dickey (1894-1977), friend of Robert Bevan and a member of the London Group, John Hunter (1893-1951), Romeo Toogood (1902-1966), Edward Marr (1905-1973) or Edward Mansfield (1907-?);[38] John Luke is another figure

---

[36] *A Free Spirit*, p.79

[37] Middleton's illustrations for the Ulster Farm and Factory brochure accompanying the 1951 Festival of Britain brochure seem to have been reproduced from drawings, but by the early 1960s Middleton was again making and exhibiting prints.

[38] S.B. Kennedy is a notable exception who has brought renewed attention to many of these artists.

who is not easy to fit into a predominantly Hiberno-centric modern canon. Most of these exhibited in the 1934 Ulster Unit exhibition. It is particularly noticeable how many women were included in this exhibition and how many female artists exhibited in Northern Ireland at this period, of whom few have been included in subsequent critical analysis.

It is instructive to study Middleton in this context as a young artist, as it reflects many of his initial interests and points of reference, as well as marking the beginning of his friendship with the poet John Hewitt. It is also relevant to note that many of these artists and others from Northern Ireland, such as Tom Carr (1909-1999), William Scott (1913-1989) and F.E. McWilliam (1909-1992), had studied in London and in some cases had even exhibited there or become involved with certain groups of artists. Middleton's clear intention was to go to London and he appears to have decided on the Slade School, until his father became ill in 1932; this frustrated ambition was significant enough for him to continue to raise the subject even when he was exhibiting successfully locally and nationally.[39]

Hewitt himself was one of the few to write about this period and these artists, much of it from personal recollection, particularly in *Art in Ulster I* and in his monographs of Luke and Middleton; S.B. Kennedy has also explored it in *Irish Art and Modernism*, and Riann Coulter has analysed it, but with these exceptions it has largely remained peripheral in most writing about Middleton and also in most recent writing about Irish art. By the mid-1940s Hewitt's writing had begun to shape the sense of a distinct, if rather rootless, contemporary Ulster painting, with its slight history and problematic sense of identity, but his hopes expressed in 1944 of an emerging generation who would go on to define a new Northern tradition was perhaps subsequently affected by the impact of the Waddington Galleries on some of these artists, drawing them into new groupings and a broader Irish contemporary vision, while the economic difficulties that Hewitt saw at that time as more of a threat to their development were to affect some others, who devoted more time to teaching or to public commissions.

[39] Interview with Jane Middleton, 2 September 2016

In the substantial body of writing on twentieth century Irish art that largely dates from the last three decades, Middleton has rarely been examined in the context in which he grew up and in which he worked until he was almost forty (there are some notable exceptions), or amongst the artists who influenced him and were close to him during this time. Instead, many writers surveying the period place him as part of the 'Waddington Group' of Ulster artists who exhibited together in a number of exhibitions over six years. It is impossible to underestimate the significance of this connection for Middleton. Middleton's friendship with Victor Waddington was unusually intense and it is crucial in understanding both men. The correspondence covering the years in which Waddington represented Middleton, offering him hope at a dark time, and then charting the success and subsequent decline of their relationship, is the richest part of the Colin Middleton Archive held by National Museums Northern Ireland and is complemented by letters in private hands. But at this time, through Waddington's assistance, Middleton became less focussed on Ireland, reinforcing the conception of himself, which he had first put forward to English critic John Middleton Murry (1889-1957) in 1947, of being the only artist in Ulster 'worthy of rank with cross-channel painters.[40] Certainly during his association with Victor Waddington (1907-1981) Middleton does not appear to have felt any particular kinship with Irish art or its history. In 1944 Hewitt was comfortable distancing him from Yeats and making comparisons with British contemporaries or cultural phenomena, while also defining Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill as a specific group from which he kept Middleton separate.

Middleton had little contact with the other members of the 'group' at this time or subsequently, apart from a period during which he was close with O'Neill, yet the relevance of the gallery in establishing Dublin as an artistic centre and the connection of the Waddington name to his subsequent international prominence, remains a significant mid-century anchor for a modernist Irish canon. Waddington's patronage permitted a certain, specified place for Middleton, O'Neill, Dillon and others, but in Middleton's case the variety of his work both before and after this time has challenged this; the creation of a canon usually benefits those who can occupy a certain clear and

[40] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Middleton Murry, 1 March 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

unshifting position within it, unless they are accepted as the central figure around whom others are placed.

The development of an Ulster canon is a concept that runs in parallel with John Hewitt's interest in regionalism in the 1930s and 1940s and it indicates the complex position that Middleton occupies, in terms of his identity and his place as an artist. For John Hewitt, he and John Luke were central to the construction of a regional cultural identity, 'the biggest men we have ever had in the north.[41] For Hewitt it was crucial that an artist was outward-looking as well as rooted in their particular locality, either urban or rural. Ironically, Middleton himself felt that living and working on the land in England had liberated him to become a landscape painter; he also wrote of the necessity of exhibiting his work with a dealer outside Belfast. Middleton and Hewitt remained close until the late 1940s, when Waddington's friendship with the painter seemed increasingly to exclude Hewitt. The latter had previously been Middleton's main champion and had seen him in a Northern Irish and an international context; very quickly he came into the sphere of a number of writers in Dublin who had a presence and reputation in the national art press, such as James White, Edward Sheehy and Maurice Collis.

As with his earlier Northern Irish critics, these writers often perceived Middleton as a national or international figure as much as a purely Irish painter and by definition of exhibiting alongside a number of leading contemporary British artists they often addressed him in this context. Middleton occupied a minor but definite position in the art world of London in the early 1950s as well as a much more central role in Dublin; he became almost invisible in Belfast for some years, not showing there for a decade between 1945 and 1954. The idea of his place in any canon shifted away from Northern Ireland but found no clear place in Dublin or England. At the point when he stopped working with Waddington or Tooth's, he was in the unusual position of having an undeniable critical reputation and a powerful body of work behind him but with a perception in some quarters that his greatest achievement lay in the past, while there was little clear sense of his position within Irish or British art at that time.

[41] Hewitt, John, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', *Now in Ulster*, Belfast, 1944, p.35

The writers who next took up the task of placing Middleton in a national context often moved away from Hewitt's holistic search for a distinctive cultural identity within Ulster. Some of those who had grown up with the border and a sense of much of what was north of it as 'other' in some way, were arguably more conscious of the sense of a generic Northern Irish culture into which artists such as Luke and Middleton were often placed. For many writers Middleton became a distinctly Ulster artist, and any engagement with his British contemporaries was widely seen as derivative rather than an example of any actual shared context or tradition within which he was working.

0.5

One might see emerging from much of the analysis of Middleton from the 1960s onwards the provincialisation of the artist through a concentration on two aspects of his work; the confusing range of styles adopted, and the derivative quality this implies, and its expression of a specifically Northern Irish creative identity.

Writing about the first of these issues John Hewitt, in his 1976 monograph on Middleton, admits that his 'versatility has surely mitigated against his achieving a reputation outside his native country commensurate with his astounding ability'[42], but in the previous sentence suggests that this might have less to do with his versatility than with the perception of it and the difficulty in catching 'his essential quality within an easy definition, or to award him a ticket to posterity on any one of the generally recognised routes'. Hewitt's analysis raises the idea that it is as much Middleton's uneasy relationship with the canon and with a range of modern painting traditions that causes his changing manner of working to be problematic.

This became the dominant, in some cases, the only point of discussion about Middleton's work. Hewitt remained ambiguous and explained it in the light of Middleton's relationship to the times in which he lived, claiming that 'Originality for an artist lies in how he handles his personal experience, and the impact of other men's pictures is obviously part of that experience'[43] and siting him in the modernist context

[42] Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, p.29
[43] Ibid., p.30

of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Francis Bacon (a close contemporary of Middleton's, born in 1909, whose initial career had been in furniture and interior design) in his borrowing, paraphrasing and acknowledgment of the works of others (although this does not necessarily touch closely on the diversity of Middleton's work).

Kenneth Jamison, however, another Belfast writer who knew Middleton well, saw these developments as often being a serious response to changes in Middleton's life or location. He is aware of the 'polarity' in the landscapes Middleton has painted that have inspired such different approaches to each place. While acknowledging that he 'works and experiments restlessly' and that his 'output, and the stylistic variety of it, would do justice to three men',[44] Jamison understands these changes as the expression and analysis of the opposing elements of Middleton's life and creative personality and the attempt to find a synthesis between them, which is close to the artist's own thoughts and reflects Jamison's friendship with Middleton (the only portrait commission Middleton ever seems to have accepted and completed was from the Arts Council to paint Jamison).

Middleton himself referred to this in the introduction to his 1943 one-man exhibition at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, in which he described the works on display as 'a process of personal integration' between 'the seemingly opposed and conflicting tendencies in human nature'. In his painting, the point at which this resolution takes place, Jamison found a connecting power that transcended the differences that had become a barrier for other critics, in 'an inexpressible sense of magic, of a presence or a happening – of something metaphysical beyond the visual reality' .[45]

For Middleton, the symbols that he writes about in this introduction and in other later interviews represent within the painting the presence of both the physical and metaphysical within the shared form that they take, much as the artist contains a similar dialectic within his own single being. Jamison, like Hewitt, allows Middleton his own context and his exemplary summary of the stages of his career to that point brings together with clarity the interweaving of elements in Middleton's life with events in

[44] Jamison, Kenneth, Foreword to *The Art of Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, February 1965
[45] Ibid.

the outside world. He describes Middleton's interactions with other artists as a process of engagement and progression, rather than a turning from one influence to another. There is no accident or whimsy in Jamison's analysis, which presents a personal line of development within a determinedly internationalist period.

Mike Catto, in *Art in Ulster II* (1977), brings together the remarkable consistency at the heart of Middleton's work across his career with a sense of the complicated layering of various ideas and references within the single image, a process in which the enduring voice of the artist is sometimes clear and at other times can only be heard with careful study. He also noted the increasing tendency in Middleton's work in this later period (the second of the *Art in Ulster* volumes covers the years from 1957 to 1976) to 'go back through time and his own consciousness and re-discover a previous line of enquiry, bringing it out with flair and the accrued riches of his years'.[46]

The changes in the style in which Middleton worked were something he wrote about himself, citing the unparalleled psychological complexity of the twentieth century as the cause for an 'unbelievable diversity in styles'.

> But why the heck if a person is aware of this should it not occur in one person instead of one man here and one there, all working differently at separate little facets of the same thing?[47]

These styles are very much a part of his work and have to be addressed seriously to understand why they occurred and what they tell us. Rather than being seen as a conclusion to a critical response, however, this diversity should be a starting-point in any analysis of Middleton. The dialectic it expresses has its roots in various aspects of Middleton's personality and his art. There is no inability to work in a consistent manner, as many periods of Middleton's work demonstrate; there is something conscious about it that cannot be dismissed.

The emergence of a large number of previously un-reproduced early paintings in exhibitions in public and commercial galleries in the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly the exhibition of work from the McClelland Collection at the Irish Museum of Modern

---

[46] Catto, Mike, *Art in Ulster II*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1977, p.29
[47] Colin Middleton interviewed by Michael Longley, *Irish Times*, 7 April 1967

Art, provided new insights and points of references for writers, although it provided little immediate sense of coherence across his career, and he was described in the accompanying text as 'an art historian's nightmare'.[48] Without doubting the challenges of writing about Middleton's work it is clear that critical discourse about his work has become increasingly problematic. Certainly the complexity and substantial nature of his art makes demands on critics that have perhaps been unsustainable within the context of survey texts or exhibition reviews. This complexity also requires an accurate and factual understanding of the artist's own history, and errors in dating work and identifying specific periods, as well as inaccuracies regarding crucial events in Middleton's life or their significance has, at times, created a confusing, illogical and non-sequential vision of Middleton as a painter that has resulted in his achievement and his relevance being minimised. The emphasis on the derivative nature of his works often implies a lack of seriousness, but while there might be no context to confirm his consistent aims as an artist it is clear that Middleton was able to absorb and understand the most recent developments in art so quickly that his work is rarely derivative in the sense that it does not fit within the ideas and progression of other work being made at a similar period.

While Middleton's work is addressed by nearly all writers on the art made in Ireland in this period they often struggle to find an Irish context for it. Arguably it is difficult to place Middleton's complex and protean creativity within these surveys and to deal with his work adequately, and perhaps this explains why the most successful and innovative and, arguably, the most accurate analyses of his painting have focussed on specific aspects of Middleton's work. Some of these have begun the process of re-examining primary sources to establish biographical facts that have often been repeated incorrectly.

In the case of Middleton these facts are extremely important. Often biographical errors or mis-dating of work have clouded clear reasons why Middleton's subject matter or the style of his work has changed at a specific point. Writers have also concentrated on specific aspects or periods of Middleton's works when faced with a large and complex

[48] Marshall, Catherine, *Colin Middleton: Paintings and Drawings from the McClelland Collection*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2000, p.1

career to disentangle and emphasised a separateness. For example, Dorothy Walker aligns Middleton's early painting with Nevill Johnson in their 'almost indistinguishable…use of Surrealist imagery', before his 'Yeatsean phase' and 'a successful phase in which his work was heavily influenced by the English abstractionist Victor Pasmore'.[49] Kenneth McConkey identifies Middleton as a 'Northern Irish Euston Road painter' in the late 1930s before writing that 'In later years he resorted to a rather arid abstraction, heavily dependent on British constructionist aesthetics'.[50] It is evident that a survey of modern Irish art cannot adequately explore the range and development of Middleton's painting, particularly when dating has not always been clear, but this problem is not always acknowledged, and analysis by comparison and influence is not unusual.

Brian Fallon asserted in an essay on the post-war period in Irish art that 'apart from the influence of Ben Nicholson on Colin Middleton, British artists made little impact here.'[51] One might, however, to look at some examples, point to the influence of Christopher Wood on Gerard Dillon, or that of Jankel Adler on Louis le Brocquy, Lucian Freud on Patrick Swift and Edward Maguire, Edward Wadsworth on Nevill Johnson or Alan Reynolds on Basil Blackshaw. It is not unusual for critics to approach Middleton through the work of an intermediary, while this is not always the case with other artists.

Catherine Marshall is sympathetic to Middleton and notes perceptively that he 'could move comfortably between figuration and the abstract patterns of the textile industry',[52] commenting that 'the Colin Middleton who emerges from that sea of art history is entirely his own man, an artist of extraordinary virtuosity, interested in ideas'.[53] Marshall also provides more sense of the environment of Middleton's early years as an artist in Belfast, but does not locate the relationship between the changing manner of his work and the circumstances of his life.

---

[49] Walker, Dorothy, *Modern Art in Ireland*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1997, p.41
[50] *A Free Spirit*, p.81
[51] Fallon, 'Irish Art and the Postwar Era', *Art Is My Life: A tribute to James White*, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1981, p.71
[52] Marshall, Catherine, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Mooncatcher', *Colin Middleton*, Clos na bhFiodoiri Gallery, Dingle, County Cork, 2000, p.7
[53] Marshall, Catherine, 'Colin Middleton', *The Hunter Gatherer*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, p.67

The consensus across most critics from the 1960s onwards, that the diversity of Middleton's work undermines its seriousness, takes as a given criteria that regular stylistic shifts are not good or, as Mike Catto points out, falls into 'the trap for the unwary critic'[54] of seeking to classify work where this is not appropriate. There is also the assumption that to maintain a single working style for a number of decades does not detract from its seriousness. One might argue that in fact many Irish artists struggled to emerge from a dominant style with which they became associated and that helped to define and locate their work within a single context, even if this continuity and repetition might have affected the development of their intentions or ambitions as artists.

One must also look at the definition of Middleton as a provincial painter in relation to the main body of significant Irish artists. One might see a perversity in the judgement that Middleton's very ambition to make work that reflected European modernism, and to engage through it with significant international events and ideas, actually defined his status as a derivative and unoriginal artist, a distant follower of international modernist developments. In fact, to understand why a certain style was adopted at a certain time, why a certain subject dominated Middleton's work, or why changes came about is key to appreciating Middleton's significance and originality. While certain notable events in Middleton's life and his artistic career have been established, the actual facts of these have not always been accurately described or they have not necessarily been interpreted as they could be in the light of a more complete understanding.

0.6

This is also true in relation to the significance of Middleton's relationships with key figures in his life, such as his father, John Hewitt, John Middleton Murry and Victor Waddington. Not only do these figures all represent different aspects of Middleton's

[54] *Art in Ulster II*, p.30

character and life, there is a progression from one to the other that can be seen to shape Middleton's emerging artistic personality and which also represents broader issues and concerns relevant at the time. For these reasons I have chosen to structure my thesis around them.

Each of these relationships are very different and all of them make strong connections between the personal and the professional world. There is also an understated conflict between the central female and male protagonists within Middleton's life. His mother seems to have been disapproving of his father's painting and even seems to have been rather uncertain about the very respectable John Hewitt, while Kathleen seems to have been the source of the initial rift with John Middleton Murry and his wife and it also appears that she and Roberta Hewitt were not close, which is likely to have pushed their husbands a little further apart.[55] In correspondence with Victor Waddington it is clear that domestic financial pressures caused immense tension between Middleton and his dealer. The domestic sphere might be seen to put pressure on the professional sphere, particularly as Middleton, in a return to what was a more pre-industrial location of the working life, painted in a studio within the house.[56]

Without wishing to exaggerate this reading of his relationships, it is interesting to note in this context that Colin Middleton was extremely interested in psychoanalysis, particularly the writing of Carl Jung, who remained a powerful influence in his work. John Middleton Murry was close in age to Charles Middleton, although Hewitt and Waddington were only slightly older than Colin and both clearly saw him as a friend in addition to any professional capacity in which they were involved. These relationships certainly draw out many of the complicated threads that connect different aspects of Middleton life and work, and its complex development.

They also offer revealing insights into the world in which he lived. Public and commercial life was still dominated by men; Charles Middleton, Hewitt, Murry and Waddington were all, to different degrees and in different spheres, notable figures in industry, museums, literature and the commercial world. But all four were in

[55] It is interesting that almost forty years after her death, John Hewitt seems to have retained a rather idealistic image of Maye, Middleton's first wife.
[56] See Tosh, *A Man's Place*, Yale University Press, p.3

relationships with women who were intellectually and politically independent and, again to differing degrees, financially independent. Maye Middleton worked as an art teacher, while Kathleen gained an increasing profile as a poet. Equally, the apparent professional independence of these men was limited and often dependent on patronage and structures in which they might retain little control. In these complex gender roles, the shifting and vanishing hegemonic identities of Victorian, industrial society is illustrated, much as Middleton's modernist cultural engagement within a local context questions the broader breaking down of social, imaginative and cultural constructs.

Charles Collins Middleton (1875-1933) acts as an introduction to the environment in which Colin was brought up, in an industrial city just past its prime, working in the industry that drove so much of its success, but which also demonstrated the limitations of its creative imagination. He was part of the influx of trained or experienced artists and craftsmen brought to Northern Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century by the opportunities it provided for work, who went on to have a substantial effect on the cultural life of Belfast (a similar pattern also emerged in Dublin, to where craftsmen such as James Pearse and Joshua Clarke, the fathers of William Pearse and Harry Clarke, re-located, although the scale of the city and the more developed artistic environment there perhaps made its impact less obvious). As a designer and a painter, he exemplifies the dialectic that I will analyse as being a crucial force throughout much of Colin Middleton's life. Through his father Middleton began to work as a damask designer; this role allowed him to undertake some part-time training at the Belfast School of Art, and gave him enormous practical skills as a draughtsman, but also held him back from further full-time study at an art college in London, placing him in a slightly separate position from many of his contemporaries.

John Hewitt was the first contemporary of Colin Middleton's to become a strong influence and a reliable sounding board. His political and cultural concerns were close to those of Middleton and represent a generational shift away from earlier values and ideals. Both men were driven to leave Northern Ireland because of their frustrations at its cultural limitations and the lack of change within the country. Hewitt's professional position allowed him to offer Middleton support early in his career but he also used

the artist in the development of some of the ideas that became central to his work. Hewitt in some way provided validation for Middleton as a painter, but around the time of his 1943 solo exhibition at the Museum which Hewitt organised, Middleton met Bruce and Kathleen Barr, whom he soon married, and began to drift away from the poet's sphere of influence.

Middleton only spent one year at the community farm in Suffolk run by John Middleton Murry but it was arguably the key year in his life as a painter and it is also crucial in our understanding of his work and motivations. This move was driven by his need to escape Belfast and the linen industry and his desire to become a painter, but it also represents his beliefs, philosophy and ambitions at the time. The plentiful correspondence of this year examines Middleton's vision of the post-war world and also explains his attitudes towards his painting and the changes that he wanted to achieve within his work.

On his return from England Middleton met and was taken on by the Dublin gallerist Victor Waddington. With Middleton having crystallised his ambitions and technique as an artist, Waddington allowed these to come to complete fruition and Middleton established himself as a full-time painter completely free from his previous dual identity as a designer. Within four years, however, the difficulties experienced by both dealer and painter began to cause the disintegration of this relationship and by 1953 Middleton was once again looking for other work and was confronted with the changes in the linen industry and the design world since he had abandoned it.

I will also examine the significance of Waddington's personal taste in the shaping of the canon of post-war Ulster art and the shift in relationship to the structures of art and design training and work that had been vital for so many Ulster painters of the 1920s and 1930s. One effect of Waddington's promotion of the largely self-taught group of Gerard Dillon, Daniel O'Neill and George Campbell ahead of, for example, John Luke and Romeo Toogood, was to create a hierarchy of qualities which arguably diminished those associated with the academic training in art and design that had been offered in Belfast or London to a number of Middleton's contemporaries.

The last chapter examines Middleton in his increasing professional isolation, despite the recognition that had returned by the 1970s, and explores the manner in which his

work re-absorbs elements of design at a time when it had liberated itself entirely from any of the traits of this influence that were apparent in his early work. It examines his work in design in this period as well as the changes in his painting and questions whether this later work demonstrates an integration of the two creative personalities between which Middleton had struggled since the 1930s.

This structure is also deliberately intended to lead the reader through the main argument of my thesis, placing Middleton in specific contexts that demonstrate the changing balance between his identities as artist and painter, both in his work and in his daily life. His father's shadow extends across the first section in which he is firmly sited, physically and professionally, within the world of design and the linen industry, a role which his association with John Hewitt gradually allows him to question and challenge through his own intellectual growth and an increasing involvement in the Irish art world.

The decision to join Middleton Murry at his community farm in 1947, and the year he spends there, marks a deliberate break with his career as a designer and with the city whose industry shaped his early years. It is also the point during which he records most clearly his own understanding of the two aspects of his creative personality and determines to move away from the one he associates more closely with design. Unexpectedly, both these aims are made possible by Victor Waddington's decision to represent Middleton, and it is only when this relationship falters and he is arguably left most professionally isolated that he re-considers the role of design within his work and is able to re-engage with the twin aspects of his creative personality. The story is told within these five headings.

Another significant purpose of this structure is to indicate that my intention is not a literal analysis of examples of Colin Middleton's damask designs against his paintings. This was decided at the outset but is also a response to the limited surviving evidence; there is a widespread absence of surviving designs from the linen mills and design companies that were so numerous in the early decades of the twentieth century. While I will examine connections between his art and his design work in terms of technique, content and habit, it is more illuminating and necessary to address the influence of industrial design in Middleton's work in the broadest terms as well as the most specific.

Therefore I concentrate on the extent to which the linen industry shaped Northern Ireland both socially and culturally to understand the shaping effect this had on the artist growing up and on his contemporaries, the broader ideas within design at this time as well as the training it allowed him to pursue, and subsequently the conflicts it presented between his career and his ambitions and the developing influence on his work at many stages.

This new approach to understanding Colin Middleton also provides a broad and historically appropriate context for an analysis of the development of modern art in Northern Ireland during the twentieth century. The themes that emerge in writing about Middleton are themes that are also relevant to the development of art around him.

The decision to structure an analysis of Middleton's development as an artist around four men who played very different roles within his life is not necessarily intended to introduce theories of gender into this analysis as a major issue. The significance of his mother, his first wife Maye and, above all, his second wife Kathleen, is also clear from my text. Certainly professional positions and positions in public life at that time remained a largely masculine domain, yet Roberta Hewitt and Mary Murry were more than accompaniments to their husbands. The latter seems to have assisted her husband's operation financially, as well as providing other support, and Roberta Hewitt was clearly present in much of her husband's decision-making and was also influential in some of his aesthetic decisions.

Gender does appear, however, to have been an issue considered in some ways by Middleton, within the context of his own world. He depicted Belfast as a city of women living difficult lives in the shadow of industry and within a patriarchal society; the linen industry had emerged from being a domestic-scale and predominantly female activity to one on a massive scale in which the better positions were almost universally taken by men, while women and children struggled in the harshest and lowest-paid jobs. Despite the numbers of women involved in the Arts and Crafts movement within Britain and Ireland, with Tanya Harrod commenting that 'the most creative end of the hand-spinning, dyeing, weaving, hand block-printing and embroidery world

was…dominated by women',[57] linen designers within Belfast industries appear to have been men. Middleton characterised the linen industry as masculine in terms of those who dominated it, writing to the Hewitts of the 'Linen Kings'.

To some degree this exclusion of women from a more creative role within industry might have resulted in the 'pastime' of design and craft with which they were deeply involved becoming more closely integrated into the institutions of art. The freedom they had from industry also might have enhanced the sense of moral worth and wellbeing that Stella Tillyard writes of being perceived within this work. Yet this exclusion from industry also mirrors an exclusion from most central threads of European modernism. Braque had described himself and Picasso as two mountaineers tied together in the highly experimental and undoubtedly risky early years of Cubism, evoking an heroic male image, but it was in the unashamedly aggressive ethos of the Futurists and Vorticists, with their relish for mechanisation and revolution, that this masculinity was most defined and in which the modernist credentials of those artists who employed the more feminine element of design or pattern in their work began to be questioned.

Not only was the rigorously hard-edged appearance of their work supposedly inspired by the machine, they also formalised an idea that had become implicit within modernism, that it was equivalent with masculinity. The modern artist was heroic, independent from domestic constraints and embraced the mass-production of the machine age; the dialectic that this established was remarkably enduring within western culture. One might also read freedom as synonymous with such heroism, so that while the idea of the designer or decorator is essentially constrained by accepted taste and commercial necessities, the artist could claim, whether correctly or not, an absolute creative freedom. This ideal was in many ways a purely masculine identity within late nineteenth and early twentieth century society, which culturally and economically, remained problematic for most women.

[57] Harrod, Tanya, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, p.43

Middleton's painting is dominated by the female form; it is only rarely that men appear in his work. In part these women reflect his experience of Belfast and the difficult conditions that so many lived through, in contrast to the lives of the Linen Kings, but the female archetype in Middleton's work transcends anything so specific. There are images within his work that can be read as Kathleen, in particular, and his children, as well as those in which one can read in a more symbolic manner the presence of them and even, perhaps, of Maye. But the female archetype for Middleton goes beyond the representation of individuals and instead represents the most powerful and enduring forces of generation and regeneration. The female form, pictorially and symbolically, becomes the landscape and the life force. It is not surprising that his painting *Genesis*, of 1957, occupies almost the complete canvas with a single female figure.

Within this depiction of the female, it is also important to locate the male. This is perhaps in the artist's gaze, in his construction of the other. Middleton's female figures range from the virginal to the highly sexualised, from the victimised and helpless to the monstrous and powerful. But this is not simply an indication of his own vision or ideas; it is important to note the texts that Middleton found most important to him, above all Jung's analysis of universal symbols, many of which are expressed through the female archetype, as well as *The Snow Queen* and Harold Bayley's analysis of the evolution of the Cinderella story.

A number of writers have indicated the consistency of Middleton's use of archetypes and symbols across his career and the connections that these make between apparently disparate styles. I have commented in detail on Middleton's symbolism in Chapter 2, Part 2, and in Chapter 5, in relation to particular exhibitions or groups of works, where it is most central to my central argument, and I have also demonstrated how Middleton's writing on symbols relates to his own work and the structure of its development. Middleton's symbolism is both deliberately universal and discreetly personal, encompassing various ideas within a single symbol as well as embedding certain symbols within the style or technique of works. In particular I have suggested that fabric design itself is used as a symbol, embodying particular resonances for the artist, as well as becoming a means of technical resolution for certain pictorial issues within Middleton's work. While concentrating particularly on Middleton's stylistic

development, this thesis has also traced the development of symbolism within his work and its continued use throughout his career and has located the potential sources of these symbols and their significance for the artist.

0.7

Colin Middleton read extensively and deeply, wrote poetry and was extremely interested in ideas and politics, and this was crucial in his work and ensured friendships with a number of notable contemporary poets and writers, so it is not surprising that there was some excellent and insightful writing on Middleton in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. Some of this remained unpublished; the Colin Middleton Archives at NMNI contain articles from around 1943 that were probably written by Lionel Bruce Barr, a poet and Kathleen Middleton's first husband, as well as a draft of an article by Sheila Greene that Middleton himself honed. There were articles published on Middleton and this circle of artists by John Hewitt, and later by Edward Sheehy and James White. There was also a regular circle of well-informed and open-minded reviews from newspapers and periodicals in Belfast and Dublin.

Many later writers drew on some of this contemporary criticism, although often certain comments that became widely used and accepted were used selectively. For example, the most-quoted line about Middleton is Tom Carr's description of the 1943 exhibition at Belfast Museum and Art Gallery (as recalled by John Hewitt) as 'an amazing anthology of modern art'. This testament to the diversity of his work across this period has not always been seen as diminishing Middleton's work but it has increasingly come to be used as shorthand for the changeability that characterised his career and increasingly, to imply something less than serious in these paintings, with the word 'anthology' itself suggesting that the point lay in the bringing together of so many styles rather than the work itself having another purpose.

There is nothing to suggest that Carr used the phrase in anything other than admiration, although he and Middleton do not seem to have ever been particularly close. I will examine elsewhere questions of Middleton's originality and the influence of other artists but later critics often elucidated further Tom Carr's comment in specifying the influences they perceived in Middleton's work. One might argue that this has the effect of deflecting from his seriousness. If Middleton's work, however, is constructed around the same modernist dialogue as a response to both world events and artistic advances that drove so many of his British contemporaries, can he be described as derivative? While he admired Paul Nash (1889-1946), Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson (1894-1982), for example, one might see similarities between their work and their broader ideas and concerns as driven by a shared experience of events rather than as Middleton appropriating a specifically English modernist narrative; the rise of mechanisation and industrialisation followed by the first concerns about globalisation and, above all, the war. In Middleton's case, personal bereavement sharpened these experiences. His reaction had the veracity of personal experience, rather than being interpreted through the prism of his English contemporaries.

Middleton's reaction to the major styles of the period is complicated by the absence of a dominating style of the time as well as the swift evolution of a number of powerful and radical styles which succeeded each other and whose followers and promoters fought for dominance over a long period, such as Cubism, Fauvism, Constructivism and Surrealism. Middleton had neither the simple assurance of a single, internationally dominant style, nor a clearly defined local identity, as there was no significant history of art in Ulster to look back to. Even more broadly, Hewitt claimed in 1947 that 'Ireland…has had no indigenous tradition of the Fine Arts'.[58] It would not have been easy to sort through these vastly differing ways of working within the short space of time during which Middleton was exposed to them, to find that most significant to him, and it is worth asking, as Middleton subsequently did, whether it would be more valid to settle on a single one of the dominant styles emerging from a centre of the time or than to experiment across them?

[58] Hewitt, John, 'The Belfast Gallery', *The Studio*, Volume 133, January-June 1947, p.15-16

Throughout his career Middleton returned to the idea of the powerful intrinsic connection between places and the people who lived in them. For him, people emerged from a specific place, belonged there and expressed its most essential nature. As Middleton wrote about *Teresa*, painted late in 1948 on his return to Belfast from England, to paint a woman from Carrick Hill was to describe Carrick Hill and the life lived there, as well as to convey a human sympathy and the mysticism of suffering that makes this single life universal in its power. Arguably it is in that idea that Middleton became an artist of the local, the Irish and the Northern Irish, and in this that his modernism found a focus that overcame the issues of provincialism and originality. There is a universality in the emotion of these paintings but they are inextricably from the place in which they were painted.

> There is absolutely no doubt that…a great number of the artists working in this province have seen the land, the human figure and the power of myth through the eyes of Colin Middleton.[59]

There is certainly a parallel in T.S. Eliot's comment about W.B. Yeats in 1940 that 'in becoming more Irish, not in subject matter, but in expression, he became at the same time universal'[60]. The unique and intimate perspective of an artist who engaged so intensely with his local environment makes his work less dependent on the artistic centre of the time for validity, at the same time as it became by choice more provincial. This is potentially the salvation of the provincial artist that Kenneth Clark (1903-1983) discussed in his essay *Provincialism*, although he appears to advocate a balance that seems a good description of Middleton

> …the painter who tried to ignore what is vital in contemporary art will become a provincial in the worst and simplest sense of the world…At the same time, I do not think that knowledge of the international styles…need prevent him from developing some of the provincial virtues.[61]

[59] Ibid., p.28
[60] Eliot, T.S., 'Yeats' (1940), *Selected Prose* (ed. John Hayward), Penguin, 1953, p.252
[61] Clark, Kenneth, 'Provincialism', *Moments of Vision*, John Murray, London, 1981, p.61

As Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) wrote, 'It is better to be vitally parochial than to be an emasculate cosmopolitan'[62]. John Hewitt advocated the need for a balance between artists in Ulster becoming more quickly aware of 'aesthetic developments inaugurated on the Continent' without making 'aesthetic in Ulster merely a reverberation of the gossip of the London and Parisian studios, or our pictures weak imitations of the international manners: for the best art is always a rooted art'.[63] In C*auseway*, a serious analysis of contemporary culture in Ulster set in its historical context, Michael Longley quotes Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967):

> Parochialism and provincialism are opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on the subject. This runs through all activities.
>
> The parochial mentality on the other hand never is in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilisations are based on parochialism – Greek, Israelite, English.[64]

Peter Lanyon, on the other hand, is quoted by Brian Fallon as having made a 'distinction between being parochial and "being local and rooted"',[65] which he considered crucial. One might see Middleton as establishing a model for artists working in Ulster after him within this complex position. His own influence on artists in the generation that followed his is an indication of this, yet it perhaps only clarifies the absence of any modernist tradition in Northern Ireland from which Middleton himself emerged. We see the elements of modernism and the paradoxes that Nancy Troy describes[66] within him and his work rather than in any broader Ulster context of which he is only one representative.

---

[62] Vaughan Williams, Ralph, *National Music and Other Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1934, p.11
[63] Hewitt, John, 'The Belfast Museum', *The Studio*, Volume 133, January-June 1947, p.18
[64] Kavanagh, Patrick, quoted in Michael Longley, *Causeway*, p.7-8
[65] Duddy, Tom, 'Irish Art Criticism: A Provincialism of the Right?' (1987), Cullen, Fintan (ed.), *Sources in Irish Art – A Reader*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2000, p.92
[66] *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, p.227

Middleton was close to many artists across his career and influenced a number of them, but his spiritual, political and intellectual concerns do not fit within any specifically Irish context that has been discussed in surveys of the period. The complexity of his work is a challenge to the canon itself. This scale and complexity is perhaps one reason why much interesting recent writing on Middleton has come in the form of tightly-focussed essays, such as those by Riann Coulter, Guy Woodward, Gesa Thiessen and Fiona Loughnane, which concentrate on specific themes, such as the Blitz of Belfast, Middleton's relationship to Christianity, the influence of Salvador Dali on his early work, or his place within John Hewitt's re-envisioning of an Ulster canon.

In a number of essays Riann Coulter has presented Middleton in specific contemporary contexts, in relation to John Hewitt and the broad cultural position in Belfast in the 1930s and 1940s, in his relation to modernist influences within Ireland and also Britain and Europe, and also in his association with the artists around Victor Waddington and his gallery. Guy Woodward has also provided a specific Northern Irish background in examining the influence of the Blitz of Belfast on Middleton. They have also begun to look in more depth at the relationship between historical and biographical events and his work.

Colin Middleton is a figure of unarguable substance within twentieth century Irish art and requires consideration on two fronts that are both crucial to achieve some understanding of him. Above all an extensive and accurate biography needs to be completed that includes dating of work, events in the artist's life that ran alongside these works and analysis of other information drawn from the artist's own writings and correspondence with friends and family. This will enable the second important point, the construction of a more appropriate contemporary context in which to analyse Middleton's work, his originality and his influence. This will range from his family background, his local environment in Belfast at that time and the international environment, the artists he grew up with and his relationship with contemporary artists and ideas.

The significance of Middleton's training and work as a damask designer and the place of the linen industry within his life and the world around him emerges from a close analysis of his own writings and also from an examination of his work, opening the

possibility of a thesis based on this which will bring together the various periods of Middleton's career and provide an synthesis that explains much about his development as a painter.

Rather than accepting the analysis of Middleton as a painter whose movement between styles and whose technical shifts can only be read as the demonstration of an uncertain reaction to international modernism and an inability to resolve a way of working that was sufficiently individual to be satisfying, I will examine whether a new reading of his work, drawing on all available sources, that brings in this perspective, can deepen our understanding of his art and his place within Irish and British art history.

0.8

The most appropriate and rigorous reading of the wide range of material that I have included in my research seemed best achieved using a range of methodologies, some of which will be relevant within certain periods about which I am writing or else in reference to certain groups of works, but which are not useful to apply consistently. As my aim is ultimately to achieve the most complete understanding of Colin Middleton through a diverse range of sources and materials, it is important to respond to what emerges from these, rather than imposing theories or analytical methods where they are not necessarily correct.

Central to this has been an analysis and comparison of primary and secondary sources. Much of my research has involved building up detailed biographical evidence through the collating and comparison of different sources, which occasionally discuss the same matter or parallel events. As more material has been gathered and assessed, it has become possible in certain cases to draw together both sides of a correspondence from different sources, or to compare contemporary press reports or other published material with private correspondence. I have deliberately examined certain periods, events or groups of work in great detail; not only would it not be possible to have done

this across Middleton's entire career due to issues of space, but I also wanted to draw out certain key themes at the appropriate moment and then to demonstrate more broadly how they related to other periods and how they played out across his career.

The starting point for my research was the archive of objects and papers given to the Ulster Museum (now National Museums Northern Ireland) by Kathleen Middleton after her husband's death, to which they kindly provided complete access. There is a small collection of objects and materials in this archive which includes objects from the natural world which inspired his painting, including pieces of bone and wood, as well as painting materials and other objects.

The papers held by NMNI include an extensive collection of exhibition catalogues from throughout Middleton's career, as well as a small number of reviews. There are some records of business dealings with galleries and also with framers and paint and canvas suppliers. Three diaries, one of which belonged to Kathleen Middleton's father, one to her sister and one to Colin Middleton (related solely to his teaching schedule for the year) seem rather randomly collected but have provided on occasions useful insights or items of information, despite the large amount of reading required. There is also a large collection of poetry, often unsigned, written by Colin Middleton, Kathleen Middleton and her first husband, Lionel Bruce Barr. This can at times be clearly connected with a particular writer and these works have provided insights into various aspects of the lives, opinions and creative processes of all three writers.

The core of the archive is an extensive collection of correspondence, mostly with Bruce Barr and Victor Waddington and a significant short correspondence with John Middleton Murry, as well as occasional letters to John Hewitt and other figures within Middleton's life as friends or colleagues, both within the art world and the linen industry. There are also occasional letters and notes to Kathleen. As well as the letters sent to him, Middleton kept duplicates of many of the letters he sent, so I have assumed that these were written and posted in a manner close to the duplicate.

These correspondences are not always complete and in some cases it has been possible to locate other parts of a correspondence in another location or collection, usually either in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland or in a private collection to which

I have had access, to create a unique understanding of certain periods and events. While some of the correspondence in the NMNI archive and in PRONI has been examined previously, the extent of it has made a complete survey difficult and some letters have not been connected with their counterparts in PRONI and certainly not with those in the private collection, to which there has never been public access.

This correspondence has provided a very direct insight into many aspects of Colin Middleton's life and his art, in particular enabling the construction of a robust and accurate biography to a degree that has not previously been recorded. There are comments on his own art and that of others that are particularly useful, as his published statements were very rare. This has confirmed connections between these statements and comments in unpublished letters that demonstrate consistent and crucial ideas between various periods of Middleton's career.

Analysis of visual material alongside these literary sources has brought about new and original evaluations and understanding of Middleton as an artist. Through art historical methodology and stylistic analysis I have been able to date works and place them within certain groups and connect them with earlier or later works to demonstrate a consistency of development and to elucidate meaning. During my research it has been possible to locate previously uncatalogued work by Colin Middleton and I have been able to access a large range of images from public and private collections of paintings, drawings and design by Middleton. National Museums Northern Ireland and the Irish Museum of Modern Art have allowed me access to their holding of paintings and drawings by Middleton, including the extensive group of works on paper donated by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

One aspect of this research has been to compile an almost complete collection of catalogues of exhibitions in which Colin Middleton showed work and listings of exhibitions where there was no published catalogue, which has allowed dates and sequences of works to be confirmed and their relationship to biographical events to be understood. I have been able to suggest new readings of many individual paintings and groups of works, as well as identifying central unifying aspects to all periods of Middleton's career.

While it has only been possible to identify one damask design made by Colin Middleton, my analysis of the linen industry in Ulster in the first half of the twentieth century has aimed to understand its broader cultural and creative role in the province and to explore its relationship to modernist design in Britain and Europe, as well as more specifically examining Middleton's attitude towards its limitations and its possibilities.

Research of the informal and personal experiences detailed in these unpublished diaries, letters and notes, as well as much broader and more general material concerning the period and place, whether it is industrial Belfast at the beginning of the twentieth century, modernist design in England, or the Dublin art world of the 1950s, has extended an understanding of the contemporary context in which Middleton lived and worked. This has been added to by an analysis of the books that were read by Middleton and his circle to achieve a sense of how they would have interpreted and understood imaginatively the cultural, political and social world around them, rather than relying on a present day understanding of those times and the intellectual and cultural life of that period.

This consciousness demonstrated by Middleton and his circle of contemporary cultural and artistic developments occurring in Britain and in Europe is crucial to my analysis, as a key aspect of writing on Middleton has often centred on questions of his originality or derivativeness as an artist. To appreciate the connections between artists in Northern Ireland in the pre- and post-war period and the centres of the avant-garde at that time it is therefore necessary to demonstrate how accurate this reading of his work might be.

An awareness of the differences of personal and public understanding of Middleton's work has been possible through a comparison of his own analysis and correspondence about his work with newspaper and magazine reviews of exhibitions, articles about his work and other published writings in books or periodicals.

A number of interviews have been carried out which have often provided interesting comparisons with contemporary material, occasionally conflicting with an accepted understanding of history or events. Some of those interviewed have written about Colin Middleton in the past and their comments provided useful starting points for

further discussion. Those interviews which revealed more about Middleton as a man than as an artist were also of great significance in building up a more complete picture of the artist. Interviews and conversations have been conducted with Jane Middleton, Colin Middleton's only surviving daughter; it has also been possible to look through various items within the NMNI archive alongside her and to discuss them, which was illuminating. I was also able to speak briefly with Alison Smith, one of Kathleen's two daughters with Bruce Barr, who was brought up by Colin Middleton. It is notable that many of those who wrote about Middleton and many of those with whom he corresponded, were male, whereas there are several strong female voices within my interview process, often family voices. This also aligns with some of my analysis of gender within his work and in society at that time.

There were certain ethical issues to consider around the Middleton family as much of the material was of a family nature, including diaries and unpublished notes, as well as letters and thus, at times, potentially sensitive. Material has been used only where relevant and where it can be ensured that a balanced interpretation of events is given, wherever possible. Occasionally certain recollections have not been consistent with published information or with information included in correspondence or unpublished writing, so clarification has been sought or attempted and uncertainty has been acknowledged if it cannot be clarified.

Despite my previous research into Colin Middleton's life and work, I had little definite evidence to support the experimental hypothesis on which my PhD application was based, that Colin Middleton's training and work as a designer within the linen industry shaped many aspects of his development as a painter, and could perhaps be demonstrated to provide a connection between apparently disparate periods of his work. I have discovered significant evidence, in a number of forms, to support this proposition. While I have covered many other aspects of Middleton's life and work, I have presented this as a crucial theme that runs throughout my thesis, but I have also noted other results and issues that my research has raised and outlined the various outcomes of my PhD as well as the opportunities for further research and writing that have been raised.

CHAPTER ONE

CHARLES COLLINS MIDDLETON

1.1

Colin Middleton was the only child of Charles Collins Middleton and his wife Dora and developed very different but equally intense relationships with them both, the implications of which can be seen at many critical points in his life. Charles Middleton is the obvious shaping force in his son's youth and early manhood. If Colin Middleton was driven by the continuing attempt to resolve a division at the root of his creative personality the earliest, and probably the most significant example of this division can be discovered in his father's own life.

For quite different reasons we can see the significant male figures in Middleton's world as outsiders in some way, even if they managed to occupy accepted and, in some cases, even prestigious positions within the society they inhabited. Charles Middleton, the first of these figures, was an Englishman who chose to come to Belfast to make his career. Born in Chorlton, Lancashire, in 1875 he appears to have moved to Belfast in 1899. Later in his own life Colin Middleton seemed to enjoy telling stories about his father that sound slightly exaggerated and are not necessarily supported with other evidence. He presented him as a radical artist within Ulster exhibiting circles in the early years of the twentieth century, criticised by the local press for the impressionist and post-impressionist influences that exerted themselves in his work.

> His father, a painter of marine landscapes in oil, was responsible for the introduction of Impressionism to that city, and horrified its critics and amateurs with his experiments in Pointillisme.[67]

In an interview with Anne Davey, he claimed that his father 'put a bullet through Manchester Town Hall clock, captained Moss Side football team and played full-back for Manchester Rangers'.[68] A 1952 draft of an article written with the artist's close

[67] Sheehy, Edward, 'Biographical Note', 'Colin Middleton', *Envoy*, April 1950
[68] Davey, Anne, 'Middleton of Belfast', *Irish Times*, 1 December 1968

involvement describes him as 'a Belfast businessman with liberal views and a keen appreciation of all forms of art' and states that Colin went 'into his father's factory as a designer of damask' (although this is corrected in a subsequent proof to describing Colin working 'as a damask designer in his father's firm in Belfast')[69]. It does seem to have been true that Charles' health was not good and that this encouraged his parents to accept that he would study at Manchester College of Art, rather than in the 'city or Civil Service'.[70] It is interesting that Middleton discussed his own decision to study art in a similar manner as a decision not to follow his mother's ideal career path into a more conventional job.

Intriguingly, there are no records of Charles Middleton having attended Manchester College of Art. His name does not appear in the records of exam successes between 1890 and 1900, or in the Annual Reports of the College of Art from 1891 to 1899. Their enrolment records only begin at 1910,[71] so it is impossible to know if or when he might have studied there. It is likely that any prospective employer within linen design firms would have insisted on a formal training of this kind, so one might assume that Charles Middleton attended part-time classes or evening classes.

It is clear from the work he produced that Charles Middleton was a draughtsman of true quality. In him, again, we see the theme of the divided creative personality, the dialectic that defined his son. While he is best known now for large, loosely-painted, impressionistic canvases that usually demonstrate his love of ships and the sea, Charles Middleton also drew extremely detailed miniatures that in mood, subject and execution are entirely different. This ability to inhabit different creative personalities with complete comfort was something that Colin Middleton inherited from his father, but whereas Charles carried this on without any apparent struggle, enjoying his art primarily as relaxation from his business and without any other expectation from it, his son found both inspiration and ongoing difficulties in integrating these into a single artistic voice and this has also defined much of the critical response to his work.

---

[69] Greene, Sheila, draft version of article, *Colin Middleton, Painter*, 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[70] 'Middleton of Belfast'

[71] Letter from Mrs Gaye Smith, Manchester Polytechnic, to Mr Sean McCrum, 20 July 1977, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

Colin Middleton does not seem to have had many close friends at school[72] and so much of his childhood was spent working in the painting hut that Charles had constructed in the garden at 28 Chichester Avenue, as well as accompanying his father on painting trips. Charles liked to set up his easel and paint on the spot, very much in the manner of the Impressionists to whom he looked as influences, whereas his son would never do this, even in the most remote area of Donegal or Fermanagh, only ever drawing in a series of sketchbooks or making notes in watercolour on the spot.

Many of these expeditions were to Belfast Docks, where Charles Middleton knew many of the ships' captains, and it is interesting that Colin continued to paint boats around the Docks as well as tugs and barges on Belfast Lough or the Lagan even in the early 1940s, some years after his father's death. One might even see this influence continued in various paintings of fishing boats and fishermen in Ardglass Harbour and, in the 1970s, of boats in harbour at Bangor.

In 1902, three years after he had moved to Ulster, living first in north Belfast and then at Cultra, Charles Middleton is first recorded as an exhibiting artist, showing charcoal drawings (of marine subjects) and miniatures with the Belfast Art Society. One of his closest friends was Hans Iten (1874-1930), the Swiss painter who had also come to Ulster as a linen designer working for McCrum, Watson and Mercer, and who began to exhibit with the Belfast Art Society (still as Jean Iten) in 1904. Even in 1980, Colin Middleton still regarded Iten as 'one of the best landscape painters who worked in Ireland'[73], and he kept a painting by him of Belvoir Park until 1970[74], presumably inherited from his father, despite the financial pressures he was under for many years.

Middleton also held in high regard James Humbert Craig (1877-1944), another member of that circle around the Belfast Arts Society, preferring his work to that of Paul Henry (1876-1958)[75]. Clearly his early admiration of these artists and the tastes formed in his childhood remained even when his work became more clearly avant-garde, and he

[72] Mrs Shelagh Parkes, interview with the author, 23 August 2016
[73] Murphy, Pat, 'Ireland's Greatest Surrealist', *Irish Times*, 21/12/80
[74] Correspondence with Nelson Bell, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[75] 'Ireland's Greatest Surrealist'

acknowledged in the 1970s when discussing his father, 'It's only in the last ten years I've been able to recognise how much of him is in my work'.[76]

This is the aspect of his father upon which Middleton concentrated when he spoke publicly about him. Clearly Charles Middleton was also a successful designer at a time when the linen industry was still at its height in Belfast but this professional life is rarely mentioned by his son. Having enjoyed a holiday in Ulster, perhaps attracted by the various coastlines and active nautical life, Charles decided to move across the Irish Sea and began to work as a damask designer for William Moyes. Subsequently he went into partnership with Hugh Page in 1901,[77] making damask designs for 'for small firms who could not afford their own designers'.[78]

Apart from William Moyes, who was based in premises on Royal Avenue, there were a number of other independent designers in Belfast in the early years of the twentieth century. William Keiller had opened a business at the end of the nineteenth century and by 1924 had premises at 11b Chichester Street, close to the impressive City Hall that had been completed in 1906. W.H. Fry, also an amateur artist, had initially been in business as Fry Bros. Damask Embroidery Designers at Wellington Place in 1913, before setting up on his own around the Lisburn Road in south Belfast. E.H.H. Branagh was listed as Damask designer and Artist at 4 Donegall Square South, close to Page and Middleton, who were established at Globe Buildings, 9 Donegall Square South, over a period of several decades.

Like a number of these and other Northern Irish designers, Charles Middleton appears to have accepted with equanimity the restriction of painting to the weekends and to exhibiting annually with the Belfast Art Society until it became the Ulster Academy of Art in 1930. In 1931 he exhibited with them for the first time at the new museum, a building which was to play such a notable role in his son's career; this appears to have been the last time he showed work publicly. Around 1932 Charles Middleton suffered a stroke and was bedridden for much of the next year until he died in October 1933. The 1931 Ulster Academy of Art was also the first exhibition in which Colin Middleton

[76] Carty, Ciaran, 'He's the Picasso of Irish Painting', *Sunday Independent*, 22 June 1980, p.2
[77] Colin Middleton, handwritten curriculum vitae, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[78] Peter Rankin recorded this comment of Edwin Bryson's in correspondence with the author

took part, in hindsight forming a brief and poignant connection between these two men who shared so many similarities.

Colin Middleton wrote very little about his mother but she certainly played a deeply significant role in his life. Dora Middleton preferred to be called Dolly and appears to have moved from Kent to Belfast independently of her future husband, recorded in March 1901 as Dora Luckhurst, living at University Square,[79] about six months before they were married near Manchester, at Salford.

Dora Middleton seems to have been the more dominant figure within the household. She is remembered fondly by a friend for her hospitality and was an accomplished cook and seamstress, teaching dressmaking at Belfast Technical College.[80] John Hewitt provides a less sympathetic portrait.

> This gaunt woman with wild glaring eyes I always felt to be something demoniac. Her slightest word was heavy with portent.[81]

Clearly she was ambitious for her only son, born after almost a decade of marriage and prized by her parents-in-law as their only grandchild, and discouraged the seriousness of his artistic interests. A friend of Colin Middleton's later described him as going into his father's business 'in protest against a career as bank manager planned by a loving mother'.[82]

Unusually for a house where two artists lived, there were apparently few, if any, of their paintings on the walls, according to a friend,[83] although John Hewitt recollects quite differently that the house was 'hung with Charles' paintings'.[84] It also appears that they owned a painting by William Pye, a landscape and naval painter active in the

[79] Census of Ireland, 1901
[80] Shelagh Parkes
[81] Hewitt, John, (ed.Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White), *A North Light*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2013, p.81
[82] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 8 August 1947, Private Collection
[83] Shelagh Parkes
[84] *A North Light*, p.61

late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and whose work was likely to appeal to Charles' marine tastes.[85]

A large shed was constructed in the garden of the house at Chichester Avenue, where they had moved in 1912 after spending six years nearby at 48 Victoria Gardens, as a painting studio for Charles (Colin later worked here too), so that painting clothes and materials would not have to come into the house. Dora reinforced the division of the 'artistic' and 'professional' aspects of life to her son as much as her husband's example could have done more implicitly.[86] Bruce Barr, Colin's friend and the first husband of Kathleen, whom the latter was to marry in 1945, wrote to him on hearing of her death, that she 'was a real character' and 'even her perversity and philistinism had their purpose and use'.[87] In particular she seems to have disliked her son's more abstract work, resenting having to explain it to friends who visited.[88]

While Kathleen, whom Colin married in 1945, was never close to Dora and there was undoubtedly conflict between them, the latter could in some ways be seen as her precursor, a strong and independent woman who defined her own role, taking care of the practical issues of life and allowing whatever creative space was to be given to the men around them. Clearly they both played this part in different ways and with a very different vision of what Colin, in particular, could accomplish.

1.2

Both in art and in design, Charles Middleton appears not to have questioned or challenged the accepted boundaries of both these worlds in Belfast, as his son certainly was to do. Belfast at the beginning of the twentieth century was thriving and still

[85] A 'Pye' was given by Colin Middleton to William and Jane Giddens from the estate of his mother in 1949.
[86] Shelagh Parkes
[87] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 3 March 1949, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[88] Carty, Ciaran, 'He's the Picasso of Irish Painting'

expanding, and linen was its most important industry. The scale of the industry and the speed of its growth were remarkable.

The city into which Colin Middleton was born in 1910 had for some decades been regarded as a phenomenon. Belfast had grown at a rapid rate throughout the nineteenth century and in many ways it could be argued to have reached its peak as an industrial powerhouse around this year. Although Partition was still some way off Belfast had, as Kenneth McConkey notes,[89] taken on the role of a provincial capital city by the early twentieth century, as much because of its thriving industrial prosperity as because of the obvious cultural differences between the northern city and Dublin.

In 1898 the city was described by Lord Mayor James Henderson as 'an Elysium for the working man'[90]. Between 1861 and 1911 the city's population trebled, rising from 121,602 to 386,947;[91] between 1880 and 1900 fifty thousand new houses were built.[92] In some years the pace of house building almost kept up with that of London. As a result of this, between 1851 and 1911 the average number of person per dwelling fell from 6.72 to 4.81.[93]

Between 1841 and 1901 Belfast was the fastest growing of the ten largest cities in the United Kingdom and it also became the largest in Ireland,[94] with city status granted in 1888. The same year saw the opening of the Robinson and Cleaver store, the owners of which were keen to publicise that their clients included 'the Queen, the late Prince Consort…the Maharajah of Cooch Behar…General Washington, and the Duchess of Marlborough'[95]. As well as representing the city's commercial aspirations, the list of materials used in the construction of this building was documented proudly at the time and was described by Charles Brett as 'a breathtaking catalogue'.

---

[89] McConkey, Kenneth, *A Free Spirit: Irish Art 1860-1940*, Antique Collectors Club and Pyms Gallery, London, 1990, p.79

[90] Henderson, James, *A Record Year in My Existence as Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1898*, Belfast 1899

[91] Census of Ireland, 1911, Province of Ulster, City of Belfast, H.C. 1912, Cd 6051

[92] Dyos, H.J., 'The Speculative Builders and Developers of Victorian London' in *Victorian Studies*, Vol.XI Supplement, Summer 1968, p.641-690

[93] Cleary, P.G., 'Spatial Expansion and Urban Ecological Change in Belfast, with special reference to the role of local transportation, 1861-1911, unpublished PhD thesis, QUB, 1980, p.120, Table IV

[94] Hepburn, A.C., *Work, Class and Religion in Belfast, 1871-1911*, in 'Irish Economic and Social History', Vol.10, 1983, p.35-50

[95] Brett, Charles, 'The Edwardian City: Belfast about 1900', in Beckett and Glasscock (eds.), *Belfast: Origin and Growth of an Industrial City*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1967, p.126

In an atmosphere such as this craftsmanship of every kind flourished.[96]

Despite some problems arising from over-development, the increasing scale of the city in every aspect continued to symbolise its remarkable ambition. This exponential growth was brought about by a number of industries that operated successfully in Belfast, but although the shipyards have become used recently to define the city at that time, from the mid-nineteenth century linen played a greater role in the lives of its people. The swift growth of Belfast had to a great extent been driven by huge numbers of people moving there from rural areas to find work, and their traditions and ways of life were maintained even in the city, so that its urbanisation remained limited even in the early twentieth century. In the late 1800s, the widespread introduction of the power loom and the industrial sewing machine meant that the industries which had been largely cottage-based became increasingly centralised in Belfast and the towns of the Lagan Valley.

In 1911, the year after Colin Middleton's birth, 30,000 people were engaged in linen production in Belfast, with a further 13,000 working part-time.[97] Belfast was home to the world's largest flax-spinning mill, at York Street, which had 5,000 men, women and children on the payroll.[98] It is interesting that 'according to a report in the 1930s, the textile industry was a bigger consumer of design input than any other manufacturing sector',[99] although this was apparently mostly produced in-house with only a small percentage produced by freelance designers or small design studios.

The opportunities available for designers within the linen industry had brought Charles Collins Middleton to Belfast; this was a time of immigration into the country from the rest of Britain as well as from Europe, as it caught up with other industrial cities in terms of employment opportunities. But despite (or perhaps because of) the very pace of its growth, as well as Ulster's lack of the cultural infrastructure of many other European countries of similar scale or industrial advancement, it appears that most

[96] Ibid., p.126
[97] Census of Ireland 1911
[98] Philip Ollerenshaw, 'Industry, 1820-1914', in Liam Kennedy and Philip Ollerenshaw (eds.) *An Economic History of Ulster 1820-1939* (Manchester 1985), p.70
[99] Nenadic, Stana, 'Designers in the Scottish Nineteenth Century Fancy Textile Industry: Education, Employment and Exhibition', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 27, Issue 2, 1 May 2014, pp.115-131

manufacturers in the province were uninterested in more progressive ideas around design, or at least uncomfortable with introducing them into their production. Norman F. Webb noted that there should not even be a need to query whether the textile industry wants 'an artist technician with ideas and knowledge or merely someone who will take orders', and identified the training and imaginative employment of designers as a weakness in Britain's international competitiveness against European textile firms.[100] Despite the creation in 1934 of the Council for Art and Industry to improve British design, there seems to have been little change in the work carried out by damask designers in Northern Ireland, such as Colin Middleton. While it is not clear whether this was a cause of frustration for many of the designers working for Ulster firms, it is interesting to note the conclusion of Frank Pick, writing in the Irish Textile Journal.

> The designer as a creative influence has been thrust out of business; as an adapter and copyist he has been kept inside, but is uninfluential. Design must be brought back to an integral and valued part of industry.[101]

There is a clear echo here with Colin Middleton's most detailed analysis of the existing and potential role of the designer within the linen industry, written in 1947.

> …it is my contention, that only the man who produces the design can really carry out the painting for he is the only one who knows what he is striving for in fabric and not on paper. To have to hand one's work over entire to chance assistants to carry out because one hasn't time to execute or even supervise the entire painting of a pattern can only result in second rate cloth. The designer neither learns by his own handiwork, nor is there any real incentive to produce new patterns once the most fascinating and therefore stimulating part of the process is carried out by people who have not the capacity to design. The work becomes deadened [?] as the finer points of one's original plans are completely

[100] Webb, Norman F., 'The Training of Textile Designers, *Irish Textile Journal*, Volume 4, Number 8, August 1938, p.6
[101] Pick, Frank, 'Individuality in Textile Design', *Irish Textile Journal*, March 1940, Volume 6, Number 3, p.23

> lost on the way – and, in my humble opinion, it's the fine points that make the cloth.[102]

This was clearly considered impractical in 1947, when the linen industry was struggling to compete against cheaper materials and production methods, but it demonstrates the rec]urring idea that the process of production should be driven by consistency to the conception of the designer. It is a clear expression of the role of the artisan craftsman, which can be traced back to the early Government Design Schools, which were established across Britain because of the perceived need for a central, creative role for designers within industry. In addition there are echoes of the Artistic Crafts Series of Technical Handbooks, edited by W.R. Lethaby, the 'first principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts…[whose]…limpid, idealistic prefaces suggested that preferably the designer should also be the maker'.[103]

This explains the importance of the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland during the period of increased mechanisation at the beginning of the century. The Society looked back to the 'principles of the Mediaeval Guilds, where a craftsman was involved in all the stages of designing and realising an object.'[104] In design during this period of industrialisation, both aesthetic and social ideals had begun to become involved with more pragmatic requirements. As the scale of production increased across Europe more progressive design concepts were often involved with small-scale workshops, and the relationship of artist to designer became increasingly complex and intertwined. The half century before Colin Middleton began his own career as a designer in 1927 offers a number of interesting potential influences.

1.3

[102] Colin Middleton, undated letter to Mr Sloan, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[103] Harrod, Tanya, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University press, New Haven and London, 1999, p.18
[104] Bruce, H.J., *H.R. Lillie: Artist and Designer*, Northern Ireland Community Relations Council

If we are to see Colin Middleton's work as an ongoing response to the problematic dialectic of artist and designer this is something that becomes exemplified in design itself towards the end of the nineteenth century and is very much an issue of its time. One could argue that the industrialisation of the early nineteenth century was crucial in the construction of Morris' revolutionary socialist vision as well as in his reaction against increasing mass production of domestic objects and decoration, which partly facilitated the globalisation of taste that was to develop so powerfully over the next century.

The coherence of Morris' various creative identities was elusive for Middleton and many others but perhaps one significant point of connection for the former between these identities came from a utopian political ideology which Middleton also shared. Morris' interest in the materials and the processes of silk dyeing led to him seeing at first hand the conditions experience by worked in this industry as well as becoming aware of the pollution that it caused. His aesthetic production, as well as his writing, was driven by a vision of how the developing technology was harming both society and traditional craft skills.

It is interesting to compare Middleton's description in 1947 of how linen production could best use the skills of designers with Ruskin's vision a century earlier of avoiding the 'inhumanity of machine production and its demoralising effects on the worker.'[105] The relationship between design and a sometimes utopian socialist vision also affected Colin Middleton's ideal of the role of a painter, suggesting that for him in the 1930s and 1940s there was a continuous dialogue between these various creative personae.

> The point at issue is whether the Artist is to be considered as a superior intellect manufacturing luxury articles for a select circle of tradesmen and patrons, or – is the craftsman to be a vital link in the social chain?[106]

Even in 1952, by which time Middleton was no longer working as a designer, half a decade after he had made a deliberate cut-off from the linen industry in Belfast, he

---

[105] Quoted in Larmour, Paul, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, Friar's Bush Press, Dublin, 1992, p.1

[106] Colin Middleton, *Note on One Man Exhibition*, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, 1943

appears to have separated the craftsman from the artist but is still seeking a clear and positive social role for the artist.

> Passionately Middleton desires that the painter should be recognised as one who contributes to the community, who produces for society in just the same way as a peasant or an industrial worker.[107]

This interest in the broader potential of design, bringing together aesthetic and social ambitions that can work together appears to have been widespread at a time when rapid social and industrial changes were occurring alongside a modernist re-imagining of the role of the artist within society or responding to society.

> In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century design gradually came to be conceived as a social service rather than an art. Its scope was enlarged to embrace the many and to concern itself with their work as well as with their leisure.[108]

The sense of what was perhaps becoming lost within craft in Britain was widespread amongst many of those who bridged the increasing divide between artist and craftsman. Walter Crane wrote of the effort to 'unite or rather re-unite the artist and the craftsman'[109], while Morris was clear (in *The Commonweal*) that large-scale factories were threatening 'the extinction of the skilled craftsman'[110]. Certainly it was accepted that it was increasingly necessary to train designers to a high level for the benefit of an industry that was struggling, in the middle of the nineteenth century, to keep up with competition in France, for example, where there was a greater integrity throughout the process of design and production. But this also required a shift in the approach of industry to these skilled designers. In a public lecture on 'Ornamental Art and Suggestions for its Improvement', given in Edinburgh in 1857, Charles Heath Wilson, head of the Glasgow School, stated that 'for some years we have been trying to improve Industrial Design, by educating pattern drawers and artisans in a knowledge

---

[107] *Colin Middleton, Painter* (draft version)
[108] Holmes, John M., 'Inspiration and the Textile Designer', *Irish Textile Journal*, January 1940, Volume 6, Number 1, p.16
[109] *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland* p.2
[110] Ibid., p.2

of art [. . .] but when our disciples pass into the workshop, they have little opportunity of applying the good principles which they have been taught. Good taste and fashion are found to be in antagonism.'[111]

It is notable that the Belfast Art Society held series of lectures which maintained the closeness of craft and design with art amongst events organised in the early years of the twentieth century. A talk by R. May in 1901 on woodcarving appears to have pointed out its artisanal roots, 'averring that it was still a craft practiced in a workshop, not a studio'.[112] In 1901 F.E. Ward of Ward and Partners spoke on stained glass, and subsequently 'R.A. Dawson, ARCA, recently appointed Headmaster of the School of Art, spoke to the Society on "Art and Craft" in March 1902 and held out the hope 'that it might be possible…to gather together a band of earnest workers, not only skilful in workmanship, but with a knowledge of drawing and design…so as to supply at fair prices honest, sincere and artistic work, and, if necessary, high class designs to manufacturers in the various art industries of the country'.[113]

In reality it was largely in deliberately progressive workshops, such as Morris & Co. or the Omega Workshop, that originality of design and continuity between design and production were maintained. In turn, this was only practical when items could be sold at a higher price, so that they generally remained within more educated and financially better off areas of society, and any of the immediate social or political aspirations of their manufacturers were limited.

But as Christopher Reed comments, 'In this regard, it is important to recall that, Morris' stated ambitions notwithstanding, his own firm was no workers' cooperative, but began as a small consortium of what its prospectus described as "Artists of reputation" turning their hands to decorative work….By the first decade of the twentieth century, Morris & Co. was thriving as a conventional commercial decorating firm in which artists' designs were carried out by salaried artisans.'[114] Tanya Harrod points out that 'the

---

[111] Quoted in *Designers in the Nineteenth Century Scottish Fancy Textile Industry: Education, Employment and Exhibition*

[112] Angelsea, Martyn, *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, Royal Ulster Academy, Belfast, 1981, p.38

[113] *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, pp.39-40

[114] Reed, Christopher, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity*, Yale University Press, 2004

founders of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society…were primarily designers who turned over their designs to commercial firms or to professional trade craftsmen or women'.[115]

The phrase 'artists of reputation' signals another area in which industrial designers and those working in a more artisanal mode of production had become differentiated. Most designs made for linen firms within Northern Ireland, for example, were not credited to a designer or design studio and while this anonymity is perhaps consistent with the social ambitions professed by some of these independent craft studios, it was undoubtedly limiting for industrial designers for whom a professional reputation and some broader public knowledge of their work would have been extremely useful and placed them in more control of their career, quite apart from any sense of creative reward that would have gone along with it.

There was certainly an increasing sense in the early twentieth century that art should not be completely divorced from design and, by implication, the latter regarded as less significant. Undoubtedly this was given added credibility because of the number and reputation of the artists who began to work in design. Around 1910, having trained and then worked as an artist for over a decade, Raoul Dufy opened the 'Petite Usine', a small workshop making textiles for furniture, where he also made designs for Paul Poiret, before becoming art director at Bianchini-Atuyer-Férier, a company in Lyons that produced silk. Towards the end of the 1910s Sonia Delaunay also began to work as a designer from a dedicated studio that she had founded, and the impressario Serge Diaghilev involved many artists with design of fabrics and costumes through his productions for the Ballets Russes in the 1910s and early 1920s. In London, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant opened the Omega Workshops in 1913, intending to bring some central aspects of modernist art into design.

Other artists such as Mainie Jellett, working in France alongside Albert Gleizes, made rug designs that shared the same holistic spiritual ideas as her other painting, and her close friend Evie Hone designed screens and rugs. Alongside the near contemporary work of the Omega Workshop, this might appear to be a broad response across a

[115] *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, p.17

generation to the mechanised horrors of the First World War, much as Morris reacted to the mass industrialisation of the mid-nineteenth century, but it actually seems in many cases to have been driven by a personal interest in exploring a different aesthetic that is perhaps facilitated by working within a different context and in a different medium, to enable a specifically modernist idiom to be explored on a purely abstract level.

A number of modernist groups in England saw the benefits of artists becoming involved with applied design, but the contradictions between careers as artists or designers seems to have ensured that most returned primarily to their work as artists and that design remained only a small part of their creative career. Perhaps it became more difficult for artists within the modern movement, which was often constructed in masculine terms in the early twentieth century[116] to remain engaged with the more domestic world of small-scale, hand-produced craft which, particularly in the case of linen, still had feminine associations.[117] While there are no doubt other reasons that could explain the perception of Bloomsbury's declining modernist relevance, the group's involvement with designing and making decorative and practical items might be seen to express a less assertive masculinity than many of the dominant figures of the time.

Whether Colin Middleton was aware, as he embarked on his career, of some of these artists' work within design, his own ambiguous feelings towards his role as a designer were perhaps shaped by an awareness of the possibilities of this work and also, increasingly, by his limited opportunities to fulfil them. One could see industrial design as being something of a nexus, either positively or negatively, for many related artists and art workers in the early part of his career. The craft movement had 'cut itself off from industrial production'[118], although Herbert Read began to articulate a move amongst certain avant-garde artists in early 1930s England away from the association with craft that had seemed intrinsic to British modernism in the 1920s, establishing

[116] This has many aspects, from the 'heroism' of Picasso comparing himself and Braque as mountaineers in their pioneering evolution of Cubism, to the Vorticists' embrace of violence and destruction that informed many artists' attitudes to the First World War at its outset (see my *Introduction*)
[117] *Bloomsbury Rooms*, p.3
[118] *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, p.17

some sympathy with industrial work. The relationship of Page and Middleton to the firms that commissioned them, working for a number of clients 'all demanding preference, was just about the least conducive condition for producing original work',[119] so that there appeared little chance that Colin Middleton could make more creatively challenging work in the industrial environment of Belfast.

In many ways Middleton's unusually complex relationship with design, as someone who saw himself above all as an artist, is connected with the limitations of the role of designers within the Northern Irish linen industry. To a great extent these were copyists, as much as they were actual designers. While most were highly-trained and appear to have had extensive knowledge of their field beyond the local environment, they were often given historic or existing designs to copy or adjust and were only involved in producing designs and never in subsequent stages of the factory process, a limitation with which Middleton expressed his frustration in 1947. John Hewitt records a telling example of the work that Page and Middleton were given to produce for local production.

> Damask designing had remained rigidly conservative. I remember Colin, when one evening leafing through the *Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition* of 1851, which I had borrowed from the library, crying out on seeing an elaborate design which he had had to repeat only the previous week for some local manufacturer.[120]

Therefore, while Colin Middleton had experienced an extensive technical training as a designer and worked in an environment that was definitively international in its aesthetic ideas and ambitions, in practical terms his work was based around copying and altering designs as much as having free rein to create designs. It is possible that not only did this affect Middleton's own conception of the significance or relevance of design within his art, but that it might even have coloured a general perception of design within Ireland that affected the critical response to Middleton. It was also likely to have affirmed his sense of isolation from those outside Ireland who were able to

[119] Letter from Colin Middleton to Mr Sloan
[120] *Colin Middleton*, 1976, p.14

move easily between design and art, and even to allow a cross-fertilisation of ideas and techniques between the two.

The artists mentioned, to whom he might have looked, were mostly located in England or France and, in general, they had first established their reputations as artists before embarking on work as designers. The direction of travel in which Middleton was to join, starting from an artisanal design training intended to benefit industry, to taking the opportunity to study further and work as an artist was clearly more attractive to those in Belfast where industrial design would offer minimal opportunities for any creativity outside copying and altering.

1.4

The physical expansion of Belfast both necessitated and facilitated a parallel cultural expansion, even if the city was slow to catch up with London or closer equivalents such as Manchester, Glasgow or Dublin, for example. Martyn Angelsea has analysed the distinctive character of art in Northern Ireland that emerged, in which 'a deep consciousness of the city's hard commercial nature and its relative isolation from other artistic centres, be they Dublin, London, Edinburgh or Glasgow, or the continent, is tempered by a fierce local pride and a desire to prove that Belfast and the North of Ireland can show its independent artistic worth.'[121]

The linen industry was not only a major employer, it also helped to create a new class of wealthy industrialists, local owners of businesses around whom an economic support structure was created in which other businesses formed and flourished. The emergence of patrons of the arts and collectors from this new wealthy merchant class and the increasing middle class, provided an environment in which the arts were able to play a new role.

[121] *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, p.1

The Ulster Arts Club was formed in 1902, with Charles Middleton as a founder member, with the aim of bringing together 'painters, sculptors, architects, designers, art workers in general and gentleman amateurs interested in Art'[122] within its membership. Martyn Angelsea notes that 'Its members were drawn from all sectors of the arts, literature, music and the theatre'.[123] The broad definition the Club made of 'art workers' seems to have been typical of Belfast in the first three decades of the twentieth century, making no divisions between art, craft and design, and deliberately embracing as many disciplines as possible and setting great store on lectures and discussions that would 'further the cause of art in Belfast'.[124]

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the creation of the Ulster Arts Club seems to have provided the impetus for further discussion of the necessity for a more organised, ambitious and municipally-funded support for modern and contemporary art. In 1905, encouraged by positive coverage in the *Northern Whig*, the Ulster Arts Club combined with the Ulster Society of Architects and the Belfast Art Society to establish a joint committee to organise a loan exhibition of significant contemporary art in Belfast.[125] The venue for this was the Free Library and Museum that had been established in 1888 on Royal Avenue in response to the need for the increasing population of the city, including the many who were now being trained as artists and designers, to see works of art of any quality without having to travel to Dublin or to another British city.

This remarkable exhibition, which took place in 1906, was organised by Sir Hugh Lane and included paintings by Corot, Courbet, Degas, Manet, Monet, Vuillard and Whistler, amongst many others, in the hope that some of these might be acquired to enhance the municipal collection, although only relatively conservative works by William Orpen and Henri le Sidaner were acquired for the city's collection. But it signals a clear intent by those in Belfast who were interested in art; a sense that the city needed an active cultural identity with a definite international aspect to go alongside its worldwide industrial reputation.

---

[122] Shea, Patrick, 'History of the Ulster Arts Club', quoted in *H.R. Lillie: Artist and Designer*, p.12
[123] *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*,.p.40
[124] Ibid.
[125] Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism, 1880*-1950, Irish Academic Press, Queen's University, Belfast, 1991, p.12

Five years later another exhibition of modern British and European paintings by artists including Manet, Monet, Pissarro and Renoir, took place in the Municipal Museum. In part Belfast appears to have been driven to improving its cultural reputation by a sense of competition with Dublin, who also held a number of impressive exhibitions of recent British and European painting in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Another representation of the cultural transformation that Belfast underwent in the 1920s and early 1930s is exemplified in the management of the Lloyd Patterson Bequest and Collection. Sir Robert Lloyd Patterson was a significant figure in nineteenth century Belfast, a flax and yarn merchant who later became a director of the York Street Flax Spinning and Weaving Company and bequeathed 'one hundred and thirty-five pictures, drawings, prints and bronzes'[126] to the Free Library Art Gallery and Museum of the Corporation of Belfast.

In a report he was commissioned to write in 1927 on this collection of works by minor Victorian artists, the British art critic Frank Rutter described it as not attaining 'a standard of artistic interest sufficiently high to justify its acceptance by and permanent exhibition in the Art Gallery of a great city'[127]. As a result of this, there was agreement that these should be sold and that the Contemporary Art Society be asked to purchase modern paintings that would replace the original works but remain known as The Lloyd Patterson Collection.

As a result of this, between 1929 and 1933, coinciding almost exactly with the arrival of John Hewitt at the Museum, paintings by leading contemporary figures such as Vanessa Bell, Mark Gertler, Duncan Grant, Augustus John, Cedric Morris, Paul Nash, William Nicholson, William Orpen, William Roberts, Walter Sickert, Stanley Spencer and Edward Wadsworth, amongst others, were all added to the municipal collection. Given the intense focus on London that had been engendered by the number of young art students who had studied there or hoped to do so, it is likely that this addition to the local collection was of great interest and that Colin Middleton and his

[126] Kennedy, S.B., *Ulster Museum, A Catalogue of the Permanent Collection: 1 – British Art 1900-1937, Robert Lloyd Patterson Collection*, p.3
[127] Frank Rutter, 'Report on The Lloyd Patterson Collection to the Chairman and Committee of the Belfast Art Gallery', 13 December 1927, quoted in Ibid., p.6

contemporaries were able to familiarise themselves with an enormous range of contemporary British painting. Having missed the opportunity to form a collection from the works on show in 1906 and 1911, there appears by 1930 to have been a much greater respect for modern art and an acceptance of expert advice, and the eventual completion of the new Belfast Municipal Museum and Art Gallery building at Botanic Gardens which was officially opened by the Duke of Abercorn in October 1929, 'eighteen years after the design had been accepted',[128] provided another indication of this. The Libraries, Museums and Art Committee had as a stated aim 'to establish and maintain in this City a high standard of aesthetic taste' and, as S.B. Kennedy indicates they 'were endeavouring to make the new museum building…a prestigious asset to the city'.[129] John Hewitt could even write that 'Art at once had become not merely something valuable in the heritage of our Western civilisation, but a lively activity of today'.[130]

Belfast's rapid industrial growth had brought together two very different social groups within the small physical space of the city. The enormous labour market needed for the yards, mills and factories had attracted many people from the country and the smaller towns outside Belfast, so that areas of the city retained many of the habits and characteristics of rural communities. The same opportunities for work had also attracted many people from outside Ulster, such as Hans Iten.

Iten had studied art in St Gallen in Switzerland (which was renowned for the skills of its textile designers and producers) and Paris and brought to Belfast an awareness of Impressionism. He was an early member of the Belfast Arts Club, and painted mostly landscapes and still life, as well as occasional portraits. There were strong connections between Switzerland and Northern Ireland, and 'a number of linen companies had set up Swiss Embroidery factories in the North of Ireland often bringing over Swiss designers and technicians.'[131]

---

[128] *A North Light*, p.15
[129] *The Lloyd Patterson Collection*, p.6
[130] Ibid., p.11
[131] *H.R. Lillie: Artist and Designer*, p.24

It is also revealing to note the many international connections that were made by leading designers within the Ulster linen industry. The Ulster Textile Journal records that after graduating from the Government School of Art and Belfast Technical School, the designer R.J. Woods came under the 'expert guidance of Albert Oettell of Plauen' and 'Emil Marfurt of St Gall' in the Belfast firm of James Glass and Co., then worked with 'the late Gustave Hove, of Amiens and Lyons' at the Broadway Damask Company, before 'further study in London, Paris and St Gall'.[132]

The influence of such figures as Iten and the many European and British designers who added considerably to the internationalisation of the city's cultural outlook, was clearly a result of the industrial reputation Belfast had acquired, yet while it had such a positive impact on the cultural environment in which Colin Middleton's generation were able to grow up, they seem to have been unable to introduce much sense of contemporary design into the majority of local linen firms. The concentration seems rather to have been on high standards of training and maintaining levels of skill. Linen must still, however, have seemed an industry with an assured future in Northern Ireland that offered great prospects to those working in specialised jobs within it.

1.5

Charles and Dora Middleton certainly appear to have lived quite comfortably. They travelled to County Donegal for holidays, as well as regularly visiting relatives in England, and Charles travelled with his son to Bruges and London in the late 1920s where they visited galleries and exhibitions, although these might well also have been work-related trips. Colin Middleton later recalled the impression that seeing works by the Flemish Primitive painters at first hand made on him, particularly van Eyck, van der Weyden. Grünwald and Lucas Cranach[133], as well as James Ensor,[134] whose influence became clearer in the later 1940s. A close friend of theirs was a manager for a linen

[132] 'Mainly Personal', *Irish Textile Journal*, Volume 4, Number 7, July 1938, p.8
[133] Colin Middleton, unpublished interview with Eamonn Mallie, 1983
[134] Carty, Ciaran, 'He's the Picasso of Irish Painting'

firm and their social circle seems to have included various people who were not natives of Ulster. Their semi-detached house, with its large painting studio in the garden, was located in a solidly middle-class enclave of Victorian red brick avenues that led off the higher end of the Antrim Road, on the edge of the countryside and away from the terraces, factories and mills of the city. Colin attended Belfast Royal Academy, one of the city's leading schools, until he was seventeen, where he achieved the highest mark in art in Ulster in the Senior Certificate, although his mother apparently remained keen, despite this clear evidence of his talent, that he should work for a bank.[135]

The success of the linen industry had created in Belfast a more complex social structure in which skilled professionals, such as linen designers, could achieve a good standing within an economically buoyant city. Yet there remained in many ways something uncertain and imprecise about the designer's position. Despite the increasing emphasis on the significance of individual designers that we see, for example, in the Old Bleach Linen Company commissioning designs from artists such as Paul Nash, most designers within the industry remained anonymous. There is a strange ambivalence towards anonymity amongst artists who also worked as designers or craftsmen. The Omega Workshop seem to have deliberately adopted a 'house style' in some aspects of their work and not sought to assert their individuality within their pieces, concerned as they were with pure aesthetics. William Morris' firm was keen to emphasise that its designers were 'artists of reputation', whose designs were ultimately manufactured by artisans.

The increasing closeness of art education with the training that designers received not only complicated a sense of the social standing of both fields, it also increased a sense amongst designers of what they might be able achieve within their professional careers and of the full benefits their skills could bring to their industry. An early prospectus for the Belfast Government School of Art distinguished between the classes for artisans and those for the 'middle and higher classes',[136] but the Headmaster, Thomas M. Lindsay, clearly considered that the effects of these courses could have broader social benefits, elevating the '"care and consideration"…of whatever is made, whether for

[135] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 8 August 1947, Private Collection
[136] Catto, Mike, *A School of Design for Belfast, 1849-1960*, University of Ulster, Belfast, 2009, p.37

"credit or…profit"',[137] and suggesting an ambition close to that of Ruskin that 'the mere mechanic is raised to the position of an art workman'.[138] In itself this also recalls the founding tenets of the Belfast Arts Club.

Belfast was very much in line with other industrial British cities in this regard. In 1933 the Belfast Newsletter reported that the Prince of Wales had opened an exhibition at the Royal Academy in London of British artists in industry, and had commented 'All forms of experts, except artists, have been employed, because manufacturers have not recognised how the artist can sometimes help in the design and consequent sale of a commodity.'[139]

The next generation to follow Hans Iten and Charles Middleton was arguably the first in Ulster for whom there was a broader opportunity for those who would previously have been training to pursue a purely artisanal career, as a designer within industry, to consider instead further specialised training as artists and to embark on careers as professional artists without this necessarily being dependent on commission-based work such as portraiture.

Evening and Saturday classes had traditionally enhanced the College's general accessibility for pupils from a range of social backgrounds and for those who were already in full-time employment, and by the 1920s scholarships and assistance were available to allow the most promising of these to study full-time. This seems very much in line with the city's rapidly developing cultural awareness at the time and an appreciation of artistic training that might not necessarily lead back to industry, but might actually lead away some of those involved in it.

The division between artist and artisan was barely applied at the School of Art by 1928, with students encouraged by the Headmaster, Ivor Beaumont, to take classes across various disciplines. The vision of 'art' and the 'art gallery' proposed by John Hewitt in 1938 demonstrates that in Belfast at this moment a modernist ethos met that of traditional, small-scale craft and manufacturing. It was exemplified in the selection of

[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid., p.38
[139] *Belfast Newsletter* 8 November 1933

artists and works for the 1934 Ulster Unit exhibition, and represented an ideology expressed by the Secretary of that group, John Hewitt.

> And it is our duty to make clear to the public that Painting and Sculpture are not greatly different in nature from Printing, Weaving, Pottery. The problems of shape, form, pattern and colour occur in these too; and the advantage of the so-called fine arts lies only in their greater adaptability of emotional connection.[140]

By 1927, when Colin Middleton came to study at Belfast School of Art, then on the top floor of the Technical Institute, where he was to spend five years taking evening and weekend classes while also working as a damask designer for his father, this establishment and its aims had changed enormously from the initial School of Design set up in the middle of the previous century. This training had at first been intended very much for artisans who might become designers within local industry, as the pace of industrial development appears to have outstripped the training of the skilled workforce; James MacAdam, Jnr., Secretary of the Royal Flax Improvement Society of Ireland, had spoken of the 'financial benefits of training local designers'[141]. It was also a central element of the School's purpose to encourage local industries and manufacturers to find suitable roles for these emerging designers.

There was particular need in Ulster for this training, given the scale of its linen industry and the fact that textiles was the largest consumer of design input amongst its various industries. Many of the facts in a report on the Scottish textile industry in 1930 [142] could be applied to some degree to Northern Ireland. Most designers were attached to specific studios, with a large proportion of design work bought in, only a small amount of which came from independent freelance designers, such as Page and Middleton. These independent design studios seem to have made designs for smaller linen firms who could not afford their own designers, although there is evidence that Page and

---

[140] Hewitt, John, *The Special Problems of a Provincial Gallery*, 1938, John Hewitt Archive, Ulster University, Coleraine

[141] *A School of Design or Belfast, 1849-1960* , p.16

[142] Quoted in 'Designers in the Scottish Nineteenth Century Fancy Textile Industry: Education, Employment and Exhibition'

Middleton also worked for substantial businesses such as York Street Spinning Mill (for whom they replaced designs for items destroyed by enemy action[143]) and McCrum, Watson and Mercer in Milford, County Armagh.

The social standing of designers certainly appears to have been changed by a number of factors in the early decades of the twentieth century. The education offered to those who then entered the linen industry as designers gave them the accreditation of a formal training that would have been rare within industry and which gave their role a definite status (although the Technical School did offer practical training classes for many apprentices within industry which allowed opportunities to those pursuing manufacturing work). In 1907, when it moved to purpose-built accommodation on the top floor of the new Municipal Technical Institute, it became the Belfast School of Art. The increasingly negligible divide between the artisanal training and the art classes at the School of Art also gave this training a social ambiguity. As with the Belfast Arts Club, there seems to have been social mobility and interaction between artists and designers working in Belfast, which suggests an interest in applying ideas and skills across different disciplines.

Life drawing had been established in Belfast School of Art by the end of the nineteenth century and landscape sketching was also introduced to the training of its artists. In terms of the latter one might make a connection with the use of floral motifs and botanical designs in linen, as exemplified in a design made by Colin Middleton for McCrum, Watson and Mercer. The School encouraged students to work with the Belfast Ramblers Sketching Club and the Belfast Art Society, which also provided a more professional artistic context. Although Colin Middleton later said that he only felt he had become a landscape painter in 1947 after he had spent some months working on the land in England, he was one of the younger members of the informal group of art college students, which included John Luke, Romeo Toogood and George McCann, who spent their summers walking and camping around the Ulster countryside and sketching the landscape and coastline.

[143] Handwritten curriculum vitae, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

Perhaps the landscape was a respite from the industrial city for these younger men as it might have been for Hans Iten and Charles Middleton, whose painting reflected an idealised vision of their adopted city and its surroundings rather than the factory life and the poverty which typified many areas of the city. Iten almost invariably painted the landscape and particularly the more appealing woods and parks around the Lagan towpath and southern edge of Belfast, while Charles Middleton preferred coastal and shipping scenes as well as paintings of Belfast Harbour. This was an escape from the modern city, which was replicated in many ways by the succeeding generation of painters, such as John Luke, Romeo Toogood, Charles Harvey and John Hunter. Colin Middleton became one of the few to engage with the contemporary city that he experienced in its fullest and more complex sense.

While the idyll that landscape painting presented in this period was arguably reflective of an untouched rural scene as interpreted through optimistic eyes, there were certainly severe problems in the city in which Colin Middleton grew up. Some of these grew out of the city's great success during its golden period of industrial development. The increased numbers of Catholics who had come to Belfast to work increased and as a result there were constant sectarian tensions, which developed into serious violence between 1920 and 1922; the same period saw problems of slums and overcrowding, as the construction of new housing for the large population had not continued during the First World War. The complex social nature of Belfast would have been familiar to Middleton by the time he left school.

During his time at the School of Art Middleton was taken up by Newton Penprase, who had worked as a Master there since 1911 and whose enduring feud with Ivor Beaumont, was well-known. Middleton even avoided the latter's classes.[144] Penprase lived at Grasmere Gardens so that he and Middleton were almost neighbours, and even years later he would visit Penprase at his house on the Antrim coast, Bendhu.[145] It is possible that Penprase might also have helped to stimulate Middleton's interest in symbolism; his painting *The Dawn of a New Day* demonstrates a rather bombastic

[144] Information from Mike Catto provided to the author
[145] Information from Jane Middleton Giddens

Blakeian vision that would have been quite different to anything Middleton would have seen among the paintings of his father's friends.

Middleton's comments in later years about the training he received at the School of Art were usually derisive, claiming that he was 'not an art school product'[146] and that he had 'walked out' 'upon being told that he didn't have to know anything about colour in order to paint'.[147] He was always quick to credit much of his skill to his work as an 'industrial designer'; 'First you cultivate speed, and then accuracy'. This is reflected in much of the critical response to Middleton's work, with an American writer suggesting that he used an airbrush; another wrote that his 'line had the apparently unerring precision of an engineer's blueprint'.[148] His assertion of the centrality of these professional, artisan skills in the development of an artist would probably have been highly relevant for many of his contemporaries in Belfast.

Yet he attended these classes for five years and apparently saw them only as a starting point in his art education, so Middleton must have been conscious of some uncertainty or of something still lacking in his training. His comments about the School of Art might have been intended to diminish the benefits of any kind of art education, as he had never gone beyond these part-time classes, but it is certainly important to note that in a handwritten *curriculum vitae* he compiled around 1965 Middleton not only notes that he had 'attended night classes and Saturday morning classes at the College of Art', but lists the certificates he had been awarded from the Board of Education in London: 'Certificate of Industrial Design, Parts I and II; Specialised Craft – Linen Weaving; Drawing Certificate; Specialised Craft – Wood engraving and block printing'.[149]

The first two of these were awarded in 1929, the latter two in 1931 and 1932, and might demonstrate Middleton moving away from concentrating on acquiring the skills necessary to his career as a linen designer and becoming more focussed on courses that would better equip him to continue as a full-time art student. Given the number of his contemporaries in Belfast who were studying in London in the early 1930s or who

[146] Cooke, Harriet, 'Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 25 January 1973
[147] 'Middleton of Belfast'
[148] Sheehy, 'Colin Middleton'
[149] Handwritten curriculum vitae (Mike Catto has pointed out that by this stage, these certificates might only have been overseen in London)

had just returned, it is likely that the time spent at the College of Art, despite his later disavowal of it, had been significant in making this next step seem eminently achievable.

Ivor Beaumont's own connections with London might explain why so many of his students studied there after leaving the Art School, and the Dunville and W.H. Patterson scholarships were available to the best students by the 1920s. Despite Middleton being closer to Penprase, he was clearly keen to study in London and his achievement in winning the 1931 Taylor Prize, awarded by the Royal Dublin Society, might be seen as the first step towards this. Scholarships provided the opportunity for the best of these students to continue their studies at London art schools. While there were some scholars, such as H.R. Lilley, who used their time in London (in his case at the Royal College of Art) to enhance their skills with the intention of continuing to work as a designer, for many it provided an opportunity to consider a career as an artist away from the various constraints of Belfast.

From the late 1920s to the late 1930s alone, John Luke, F.E. McWilliam, Joy McKean and John Turner studied at the Slade School, William Scott and his friend William Easson Tocher at the Royal Academy Schools, George McCann, Elisabeth Clements, John Hunter, Mercy Hunter, James McCord, Jean McGregor, Crawford Mitchell and Romeo Toogood at the Royal College of Art. This is to ignore Tom Carr, whose route to the Slade had not included any study in Belfast, although he was to return to Ulster about five years after completing his studies and played a part in the development of post-war Northern Irish painting.

When one considers that from this list Middleton was at the college with Toogood, William Scott, Mercy Hunter, Jean McGregor and Elisabeth Clements, as well as George McCann, who lived off the Antrim Road and with whom he often walked home, it is easy to understand why this lack of a London training remained such an issue in his mind even after he was established as a successful professional painter. If one looks back at the list of the leading artists represented in the new acquisitions of the Lloyd Patterson Bequest, Mark Gertler, Augustus John, Paul Nash, William Orpen, William Roberts, Walter Sickert, Stanley Spencer and Edward Wadsworth had all been star pupils at the Slade. It appears that Middleton intended to go to the Slade around 1932,

the year he won the Taylor Scholarship awarded by the Royal Dublin Society. His father's stroke and continuing ill health prevented this and instead he took his father's place within the design firm Page and Middleton, working alongside a much older business partner.

A catalogue for an American group exhibition in 1950 actually listed Middleton as having studied 'in Belfast and The Slade' and a 1955 exhibition of Contemporary Irish Art held in Aberystwyth also makes this claim (although it also has his year of birth as 1909, so the source of their facts is uncertain). There is an understandable ambivalence in Middleton's attitude towards the circumstances of his own training, although it is telling that he continued to raise the matter and discuss it in interviews into the 1970s, acknowledging that his father's ill health prevented him from continuing his training in London.

For many of the more talented members of this inter-war generation in Belfast, however, the transition was clear, from a part-time training that had evolved from an artisanal course which envisioned a practical, industrial outcome, to a specialised training in various aspects of fine art, including printmaking, often taught by respected artists. Just as important was the shift in environment, from Belfast to London, where not only were there plentiful museums and commercial galleries with whom one might make contact, but there was also an established path to becoming a professional artist. At the heart of this change was the enormous development in design training that had taken place across British cities during the late nineteenth century. It is ironic that these opportunities pushed many promising designers towards a career in art, as the provision of this very coherent training at the design schools was intended as a benefit to industry by fulfilling the needs of damask producers and to ensure that British products were able to compete across an increasingly international market.

In addition to the early influence of design work and training on many of those who became artists at this time, and the often short-lived involvement of established artists as designers, there is another interesting aspect of this correspondence that becomes particularly relevant to Middleton's work in the early 1940s and later. The pictorial potential of using pattern and imitating fabric and material designs and textures was

extremely influential in some modernist developments and demonstrates how artists began to look outside the traditions of their own craft and training.

Such influences were drawn from very different sources of inspiration and used for very different reasons. Georges Braque, who had originally worked as a decorator and house painter while studying art part-time, introduced into collages that continued the development of Cubism in 1912 a mass-produced wallpaper that imitated the grain of wood. On a purely pictorial level this conflation of the physical and imitative also flattened the picture space with its continuing pattern while also suggesting the image created within the picture. Similarly Matisse, in the 1920s, began to use the patterns of the 'Chinese porcelain and Japanese screens, Persian carpets and textiles, Oriental garments as well as fabrics with striking patterns and radiant colours'[150] that he collected and had seen on his travels and in museums, to intensify a painting's rhythm and unite the image and surface. Everything takes on a meaning, yet the elements of the painting are often signifiers of this meaning rather than themselves conveying the meaning.

Middleton never mentioned these artists amongst his influences, but I will discuss in later sections how close Middleton's use of pattern and the imitation of fabric and material comes to both Braque and Matisse, creating similar ambiguities within pictorial space and meaning. He certainly grew up in a period when there was enormous flexibility between design, manufacture and art that assisted in the enormous progress made in all fields.

1.6

Even as a teenager Middleton's interest in art clearly stretched beyond the local scene. In 1928, only a matter of months after leaving school and beginning his art training, he visited London with his father and saw an exhibition of paintings by van Gogh at the

[150] Müller, Maria, 'The Decorative Painting', Müller-Tamm, Pia (ed.), *Henri Matisse: Figure, Colour, Space*, Hatje Cantz, Germany, 2005, p.218

Leicester Galleries that was to remain arguably the most powerful force on his work for many years. In 1931 they visited Bruges, a city with strong connections to the Ulster linen trade, and the Flemish primitive painters made a strong impression. One could trace the female figures in much of his early work back to this influence and it re-appeared in many paintings of the 1970s.

These two early experiences confirmed in Colin Middleton a sense of belonging to a Northern European tradition that never left him, despite the pleasure he took in later visits to Spain and Australia. In the 1970s Middleton made a point of going to London to see an exhibition of Belgian art. It is difficult to know what modern art he saw in 1931, but his work of the 1940s and 1950s would indicate familiarity with James Ensor and René Magritte at least.

Middleton entered the School of Art much more educated about art and design than most of his contemporaries are likely to have been, as well as with significant practical experience. He told John Hewitt that he had painted his first picture in oils at the age of seven,[151] and not only had he worked alongside his father, he had been in the company of artists for much of his childhood. In addition he must have been highly aware of his father's design work; it seems unlikely that Charles Middleton would have taught him about one and not the other. And while Colin's tastes were more modernist, his father's interest in the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists must have given him an awareness of recent European art that was rare amongst Belfast art students.

It is difficult to know how concrete Colin Middleton's plan to continue his studies in London might have been in 1932. His mother would undoubtedly have been against it. Charles Middleton was left bedridden by a stroke that year and was unable to carry on with his work. Until that moment, damask design must have appeared to Colin Middleton as the route through which he could actually embark upon a career as an artist. His work as an apprentice alongside his father for the five years during which he had taken classes at the art college had provided him with exceptional technical skills to add to his natural gifts and his knowledge of art. His mother had apparently allowed him this time at Belfast School of Art only because of the benefits it would bring to his

[151] Hewitt, John, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976, p.11

design career, a career it seems she had only reluctantly permitted. One might imagine that Colin felt that once he was established as a student in London he could plan practical steps to become a professional artist.

Design and the linen industry had until now provided him with opportunities to further his artistic ambitions, but at this point it began to represent something quite different, a barrier to becoming an artist and with definite limitations. The idea that there was a straightforward path for him to work as a damask designer had also become much less clear cut since he had first joined Page and Middleton in 1927. The 1929 Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression of the early 1930s had had an enormous impact on the linen industry and therefore on Northern Irish society at all levels. In 1930 unemployment amongst linen workers in Belfast reached nearly 20,000,[152] and in 1932, the year Middleton took over his father's business role, around 30% of the population was out of work.[153]

It is likely, however, that the underlying causes for a reduction in the demand for linen goods were already present before this and that the impact of much larger events, such as the Depression or the Second World War, only covered up a long term decline. Northern Ireland's export markets, such as Australia, Canada and North America (a market for which Page and Middleton had designed[154]), began to adopt more protectionist policies that affected imports such as linen and there was also an increasing demand for less expensive, mass-produced fabrics. Ulster linen had become a luxury good at a time when there were more alternatives and when the public had, in general, less money to spend on household goods and clothing.

Increasing unemployment caused social unrest throughout this period, and the sectarianism that was ingrained into Northern Irish society spilled over into significant violence on a number of occasions, although there were occasional points at which both sides of the community joined together to try to improve rights and conditions for all workers. The politicised environment of Belfast clearly affected Middleton, who was committed to socialist politics throughout the 1930s and 40s.

---

[152] *Belfast: The Origins and Growth of an Industrial City,* pp..157-168
[153] *H.R. Lillie: Artist and Designer*, p.28
[154] Handwritten curriculum vitae

Neither the linen industry nor the world around him offered Middleton the security or opportunity that it had offered his father in 1901, yet neither did it offer any alternative career as a painter. For the first sixteen years of his career as an exhibiting artist, Colin Middleton worked full-time as a damask designer. In 1931, while he was beginning to exhibit and make a reputation as an artist, the balance of his creative life was still quite different to what it had become by 1947. Colin Middleton had benefited enormously from the environment in which he was brought up, accompanying his father on weekend painting trips and journeys outside Northern Ireland when they visited galleries. His father's friends were artists and he acquired skills that allowed him to make an easy transition into linen design, even though his intention was to use them to excel at the Art School. Becoming a linen designer on leaving school was his opportunity to avoid the career his mother would have preferred for him.

Yet it would be easy to underestimate Colin Middleton's pride in his achievements at their family firm. Not only did he often comment on the manner in which this training had benefited him as an artist, both technically and in the sense of discipline it had imposed, he also recorded a number of notably impressive commissions that the firm had completed, including re-designing the household linen for Buckingham Palace and the presentation linen for HRH The Duke of Kent.[155]

The broader environment of Belfast in Middleton's youth that had to some extent been shaped by the city's industrial success, prosperity and accompanying cultural expansion, also provided opportunities to see British and European modern and contemporary art locally, to exhibit locally and to train at an Art College alongside talented local contemporaries, regardless of their social background. Yet the practical difficulties caused by the loss of his father and the struggle to maintain work as a designer within a shrinking linen industry (although Hugh Page did write to Middleton in 1948 that he had been very busy),[156] seem to have begun to constrain Middleton's sense of himself as a painter and to have come more to the fore in the struggle for personal integration that he sought in his painting. In the later 1930s Middleton's art

[155] Ibid.
[156] Letter from Hugh Page to Colin Middleton, 12 January 1948, Private Collection

became the sphere in which this dialectic was played out, alongside other deeply personal issues.

Despite his fondness for Hugh Page, Middleton was clearly frustrated by him and considered that he could have achieved more as a designer on his own.

> …being in partnership with a man who was so much my senior, had its handicaps – especially where something really new in the way of designs and woven effects was concerned. Hugh, for all that he was a real good sort, was a continual weight round my shoulders. As you know – what was considered good design in Hennings and Walpoles forty years ago just won't go over the counter now.[157]

A series of changes in his life seem to have propelled him to the momentous decision of 1947 to leave Northern Ireland and the linen industry behind, but it was only really an even more significant event of the following year, Middleton's first meeting with Victor Waddington, that actually provided a permanent break with design and allowed him to become a professional painter for the first time. By that stage the influence of design on his work and his creative identity was such that it maintained a conflict and a dialogue within his work until the end of the 1970s.

[157] Letter from Colin Middleton to Mr Sloan

CHAPTER TWO, PART ONE

JOHN HEWITT

2.1.1

In 1934, the year after his father had died, Colin Middleton first met John Hewitt. Hewitt's description of that first impression of the young artist is one of the most striking of all his recollections of his friends and contemporaries.

> Below medium height, his round head a tangle of dark curls, his eyes large and expressive, his mouth wide, he is one of the very few people whom I have felt, on first meeting, to be exceptional, even, perhaps, a genius.[158]

This was written in the early 1960s, when Hewitt and Middleton had become less close as friends and at a point when their professional relationship had also shifted and become much less significant to both men. It would also have been premature to mythologise an artist still only in his early fifties and recovering from mid-career problems that had forced him, unwillingly, into teaching. This only reinforces the authenticity of Hewitt's judgment. Most remarkable, perhaps, is that the events and challenges of the previous thirty years had not affected or altered that judgement.

There is no written record of Middleton's opinion of Hewitt. Their friendship outlasted several more intense relationships in Middleton's life, perhaps because there always seemed to be some distance between them, despite Hewitt playing a number of important roles that helped Middleton more than has perhaps often been recognised. Hewitt offered some of the professional (one might also add financial) assistance that Victor Waddington subsequently provided, some of the political involvement and, arguably, literary guidance that he hoped for from Middleton Murry and some of the balancing of the creative and the practical identities that his father had represented.

By every measure of professional collaborations and shared interests and opinions, one would have expected this to have been the defining friendship of Colin Middleton's

---

[158] Hewitt, John, (ed.Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White), *A North Light*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2013, p.80

career. In his relationship with Hewitt, many of the artistic and intellectual concerns that were to shape Middleton as an artist over the next decade and a half were crystallised. The influence of Charles Middleton had, in many ways, been practical and emotional and had been rooted in the everyday life of Belfast, with occasional tantalising glimpses of artistic possibilities beyond this. In Hewitt's eyes, Middleton was accepted as a painter above all else (he also admired and encouraged his poetry, while occasionally sharing misgivings about it with mutual friends). Even at points when he was uncertain about the direction of Middleton's work, he always supported him and believed in the seriousness of intent with which his friend pursued his creative ambitions.

Psychologically, and through strategic practical assistance, Hewitt assisted him in his increasing desire to move away from a career in damask design, although he always credited this background for having 'given him the discipline, which, allied to his abundant native ability, made him the most versatile and accomplished draughtsman I have ever known.'[159] Throughout the 1930s and the early 1940s, a period of immense change and significance for Middleton in his personal life, it was arguably through John Hewitt that Middleton became established, in the eyes of many in the small Belfast art world, as 'our first artist'.[160]

Their relationship can be studied both through contemporary documents and Hewitt's later critical writing. Most revealing is Hewitt's correspondence with Middleton between June 1947 and May 1948, when the latter was living in England, and the poet's earlier correspondence with Patrick Maybin, a Northern Irish doctor, an aspiring poet and a mutual friend who was stationed abroad and then in England during the war.

Hewitt was almost certainly the first critic to write about Middleton's work and he continued to do this for more than fifty years, in reviews, catalogue introductions, journals and surveys, in his 1976 monograph and, ultimately and fittingly, in an obituary of the artist. We can trace his changing attitude to Middleton's work, as well as seeing how he attempted to use the painter to shape or exemplify his own developing cultural

[159] Ibid., p.81
[160] Hewitt, John, *Art in Ulster I*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1977, p.105

theories. Their friendship and professional relationship was very much a two-way exchange. Middleton was an unusually intelligent and well-read man, as Hewitt himself testifies, but having left school at 17 and having experienced only part-time study at the art college, Hewitt must have been invaluable for the younger artist, providing intellectual reassurance and the benefits of a more structured education.

Hewitt has also provided a unique historical perspective on Middleton, as the only writer to have known him well when the latter was working as a damask designer. His matter-of-fact recollection of this background includes the frustrations of this daily 'drudgery', as Hewitt described it, but it is also revealing that Hewitt discusses its influence on Middleton's work at greater length than he allows to the 'local Art School'.

> …it is incontrovertible that the minute work of providing designs consistent with the loom's necessities, must have given him the discipline, which, allied to his abundant native ability, made him the most versatile and accomplished draughtsman I have ever known.[161]

Hewitt's admiration appears to have only grown from the powerful impression of this first meeting that he so memorably described. It seems unlikely that without Hewitt's sympathetic appreciation of his work, Middleton would have been the first artist selected to have a solo exhibition at Belfast Museum and Art Gallery when it re-opened after the Blitz, and Hewitt was also on the visual arts committee of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, which gave Middleton his second significant solo exhibition in Belfast in 1945. While Middleton was a well-known figure in local artistic circles by the early 1940s, these exhibitions represented a major progression for him and also led to a number of sales, including one to John Rothenstein, then Director of the Tate Gallery, who opened his 1945 exhibition. Hewitt hinted to Patrick Maybin, in a rather coy manner, that he was instrumental in the Museum acquiring a painting by Middleton just before the 1943 exhibition, although Middleton did complain that they had chosen a particularly conservative work; when Hewitt wrote an article for *The Studio* in 1947 on the 'Belfast Art Gallery', this was one of the two pictures by

[161] *A North Light*, p.81

contemporary Northern Irish artists that were reproduced (the other being by John Luke).

Certainly the two men were crucial for each other at the time when they met. Hewitt provided a sensitive, sympathetic and well-educated sounding board for Middleton's art, poetry and wide-ranging and developing intellect, as well as having the professional resources to advance his career in very practical ways. Middleton helped to form Hewitt's concept of a particular, intrinsic regional identity within this local culture and ultimately was central to his attempts to establish a local modernist canon, and he also helped secure, through their close relationship, a central role for Hewitt within the Northern Irish art world of this period.

Since 1930, Hewitt had worked as an assistant at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery and had begun to write and lecture locally on art. His interest in visual art had been shaped in childhood; Hewitt's brother had been a keen printmaker, while his father wrote occasional articles on art and both parents painted as a hobby. Despite attending classes at the Belfast School of Art, Hewitt had accepted that he 'had only a small talent for drawing and a little more for modelling…and, consequently, Art occupied no place in the perpetually fluctuating hierarchy of my ambitions'.[162] It is possible that his wife Roberta's short-lived career as a potter might have influenced some of his thinking and taste at these early stages. S.B. Kennedy notes that 'Hewitt had very little direct training in art history'.[163]

Yet while travelling in Europe with his father, Hewitt visited museums in Bruges, Brussels and Paris and appears to have maintained a sufficiently strong interest in art to have made the decision to apply for the post of Art Assistant at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery when it was advertised in 1930.

> …with a rectangle of newsprint I was cut loose and set out on a path far beyond my imagination or ambition.[164]

[162] Ibid., p.7
[163] S.B. Kennedy, interview with the author, 11 August 2016
[164] *A North Light*., p.4

It is notable that Hewitt approached the role he was offered within the museum with an unusually enquiring and open-minded attitude towards modern art and European art in general, although of the artists by whom he recalls being most impressed during these journeys, the most avant-garde was Rodin, and there is some ambivalence when he writes of Matisse and the Impressionists.

2.1.2

The first Belfast artist with whom Hewitt appears to have become friendly and certainly the first whom he championed was John Luke, an almost exact contemporary whom he met shortly after the latter's return from London, where he had lived on for a short period after completing his studies at the Slade. Hewitt attributed this return to 'the depression hardening and the chances of earning a living diminishing'[165], although Joseph McBrinn refers to Luke's own description of a 'crisis' he had while still living in London, which had returned subsequently in Belfast.[166]

Hewitt quickly became a committed supporter of Luke's work, not only personally by commissioning work privately, but also professionally, as in the mid-1930s 'he began to promote the purchase of Luke's work in the museum'.[167] This dual support provided the outline for Hewitt's early assistance of Middleton and arguably Middleton came to supplant Luke in Hewitt's estimation, if never becoming so close personally. Despite the role of confidant that Hewitt seemed to adopt with Luke, Riann Coulter points out that 'his celebration of…Colin Middleton, was informed by the belief that Middleton's combination of local and international references could provide a blueprint for regional modernism'.[168]

[165] *A North Light*, p.51
[166] McBrinn, Joseph, *Northern Rhythm, The Art of John Luke*, National Museums Northern Ireland, p.26
[167] Ibid., p.31
[168] Coulter, Riann, 'John Hewitt: Creating a Canon of Ulster Art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 8, December 2013, p.2

Although he did not meet Middleton until 1934, Hewitt had first seen his work in 1931, at the UAA exhibition, when he had picked it out as one of the occasional exceptions in an exhibition where he found the 'total effect is depressing'.

> Chiefly it emphasises…that Ulster artists are mostly ignorant and uncritical, out of touch with contemporary tendencies…[169]

Colin Middleton was one of the rare exceptions and one can sense in Hewitt's ambivalence that he himself was still working out his opinion of this little-known artist, suggesting that his work would 'create endless discussion' and making a couple of minor criticisms of taste more than anything more substantial, concluding with the ambiguous line, 'Any other comment must spring from venerable prejudice'.[170]

It is initially through the annual exhibitions of the Ulster Academy of Arts that we gain a sense of Middleton's work, as it remained one of the few venues in which he had the opportunity to exhibit early in his career. Hewitt describes the two commercial galleries in Belfast at this time, one of which sold reproductions in expensive frames, the other occasionally showing prints and paintings by more traditional Northern Irish artists such as Paul Henry and Frank McKelvey.[171]

Despite having been invited to give a talk on *Art and Experience* to the Academy in 1932, Hewitt was as critical of the 1934 exhibition, which was held in the Academy's own rooms at the Old Museum Building in College Square, as he had been of the first exhibition in 1931, but again picked out Middleton for positive comment. It is likely that Hewitt's review was written shortly before he became acquainted with the artist. There is arguably a slight sense of condescension as he first dismisses one work as too obviously influenced by Edward Burra ('but it has probably worked that influence out of his system'), then suggests that a print is a re-working of an oil painting Middleton had previously exhibited, before he praises a pastel which 'actually gives us something individual in the contemporary spate of reclining figures'.[172]

---

[169] Hewitt, John, Review of Ulster Academy of Arts Annual Exhibition, *The Northman*, Winter 1931
[170] Ibid.
[171] See Hewitt, *Art in Ulster I*, p.124-5; the second of these is likely to be the Magee Gallery, the first possibly William Rodman & Co., based at 41 Donegall Place, Belfast, since about 1890.
[172] Hewitt, John, Review of UAA exhibition, *The New Northman*, Autumn 1934

Hewitt's review is harsher than that of the *Belfast Newsletter* critic, who wrote that 'Without in any way showing a leaning towards 'cubism' or the 'futuristic style' the modern trends and tendencies are all represented',[173] revealing a very different understanding of contemporary art as well as very different expectations of how the Academy would represent it. It is interesting, however, that this same critic picked out Colin Middleton as having submitted 'the most remarkable piece of drawing' in the exhibition. The sculptor Morris Harding stated that the lack of modern work in the Ulster Academy of Arts exhibition in 1935 was because it had not been submitted rather than because it had been rejected.[174]

Typically, in his review, Hewitt is absolutely assured in his assertion that Luke's painting *The Dead Tree* is 'immeasurably the best painted picture here'. Once he had taken up an artist Hewitt was always happy to advance their cause in strong terms, typical of the self-proclaimed apologists of many modern movements such as Herbert Read, whose role Hewitt appears to have hoped in some ways to emulate on the local stage. Given that he was so convinced by Middleton's genius on their first meeting, it seems likely that it was just after the UAA exhibition had opened near the end of October that Middleton, accompanied by his future wife Maye McLain, brought him the plate for the catalogue of the Ulster Unit exhibition that opened on December 18th.

It is notable that Middleton was given this privilege, considering that he was not only one of the younger members of the Unit but also one of the few who had not studied in London, which suggests that he was already held in some regard by his contemporaries and his work was well known to them. The Ulster Unit was the first occasion on which Middleton seems to have been able to exhibit his work in a context that, visually and intellectually, was closer to his own ambitions than the catch-all of the UAA. It also re-united him with many of his contemporaries and near-contemporaries from the School of Art who had gone on to further study in London, the majority of whom had returned to Northern Ireland.

---

[173] *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 October 1934, quoted in Angelsea, Martyn, *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, Royal Ulster Academy, Belfast, 1981, p.94
[174] Ibid., p.96

Roberta Hewitt noted in her diaries that on the 30th October 1934, 'Harvey, Mansfield, Toogood, Miss Yeames, Miss Clements, called to ask JH to be secretary of Ulster Unit'.[175] While the Ulster Unit has generally been seen as a deliberate attempt to create a broad modernist front in Northern Ireland in line with Unit One in England, with the typical complexity and interconnected nature of the Belfast art scene it also grew out of the Northern Ireland Guild of Artists. As its name suggests the Guild positioned itself close to the revival of interest in craft and small-scale artisanal production that had been carried on by the Arts and Crafts Society of Ireland and the Guild of Irish Art Workers, although its activities appear to have been limited. The high numbers of women artists included in the Ulster Unit exhibition (there were six women and eleven men represented in the exhibition, reflected the increasing involvement of women in the Arts and Crafts Society in the earlier part of the century, when it rose from nineteen to thirty-six between 1906 and 1916.[176] The Unit's lineage is revealing in its difference from the evolution of the more classically modernist Unit One, maintaining its involvement with a tradition of craft and artisanal skills from which the Unit One artists appear to have distanced themselves and remaining 'more inclusive of makers and more receptive to craft'.[177] Herbert Read emphasised the sense that craft, without 'economic and practical justification' would 'end in artificiality and crankiness'.[178]

> Indeed, making things by hand in the mid-1930s began to seem economically and socially irresponsible.[179]

The Ulster Unit is perhaps closer in their inclusiveness to Roger Fry's first Post-Impressionist exhibition in London in 1910, which included 'earthenware and stone pottery by painters'[180] such as Matisse, Derain and Vlaminck.

The Guild had emerged from the Ulster Arts Club in 1933, possibly in response to the Ulster Academy of Arts, which itself seemed less sympathetic to representing the

---

[175] Roberta Hewitt Diaries, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/2/1/A2
[176] Harrod, Tanya, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, p.22
[177] McBrinn, Joseph, 'The Crafts in Twentieth Century Ulster: From Partition to the festival of Britain, 1922-1951', *Ulster Folklife*, volume 5, 2005, p.60
[178] Read, Herbert, *Art and industry*, Faber & Faber, London, 1934, p.123
[179] *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, p.120
[180] Ibid., p.20

divergent aspects of art within Northern Ireland.[181] It is possible that these small groups were set up as much in an attempt to find a market for contemporary art within Northern Ireland, with its limited gallery network, as much as it was a focus for the local and mostly youthful avant-garde. John Hunter, a painter and printmaker from the generation preceding Luke and Middleton, who had studied at the Royal College of Art, was the instigator of this group.[182] Typically in this small and interlinked local art scene, Hunter had also been elected one of the first Associates of the Ulster Academy of Art in 1930. The Guild's members shared the aim of 'co-relating the 'various crafts of its members with one another, with the homes they are made to adorn and the age to which they belong.'[183] These were unmistakeably modernist ambitions that seem to have emerged without any particular local context, addressing 'contemporary issues concerning the unification of art with craft' and 'the place of the art object',[184] that suggest the involvement of many recent London students. There is a definite contemporary context for their conception of the art object in its existence beyond the studio or the gallery and in the home, in Paul Nash's 1932 essay *Room and Book*, and the accompanying exhibition in the same year, which considered the furnishing of a modern interior and advocated that 'an adventurous modern interior would necessarily include handmade objects'.[185] It is not unlikely that some members of the Guild who had studied in London in the early 1930s would have been aware of this exhibition.

The Guild only seems to have survived for one exhibition, which took place in 1933, the month after Charles Middleton had died, before becoming absorbed into the Ulster Unit. Nearly all the members of the Unit, Colin Middleton included, had also been members of the Guild, but the fact that John Hunter was not among those who had

---

[181] It is interesting that the principles of the Ulster Unit could also be seen as a more ambitious and coherent continuation of the founding ethos of the Belfast Arts Club, to bring together 'painters, sculptors, architects, designers, art workers in general and gentleman amateurs interested in Art' and 'to promote the social intercourse of art workers in Belfast and neighbourhood and to further the cause of art' (Shea, Patrick, 'History of the Ulster Arts Club', quoted in H.J. Bruce, p.12)

[182] Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism, 1880-1950*, Irish Academic Press, Queen's University, Belfast, 1991, p.73

[183] McVeigh, Emma, *Regionalism, modernism and identity: Sculpture in Northern Ireland, 1921-51*, Ulster University, unpublished PhD thesis, 2013, p.252

[184] Ibid.

[185] *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, p.111

visited John Hewitt to seek his involvement might suggest that the younger members were becoming more dominant.

Despite, or because of, its self-proclaimed closeness to Unit One, the Ulster Unit also showed pottery, embroidery, stained glass and architectural designs alongside paintings, drawings and prints. Unit One had brought together architecture, sculpture and painting in an attempt to find connections throughout the visual culture of the day, with its stated aim 'to stand for the expression of a truly contemporary spirit'. [186] Artists had explored new media in an attempt to bring contemporary art closer to design. Certainly the ambition of bringing together a range of disciplines within a united aesthetic, as S.B. Kennedy points out, had never previously been explored by an exhibiting group within Ireland.[187]

The degree to which this ambition influenced the practice of some of the more avant-garde artists in Northern Ireland even after the Ulster Unit had drifted apart is notable. John Luke continued to make prints and also experimented with carving, exhibiting a sculpture in the 1936 Ulster Academy exhibition, while his friend Nevill Johnson, who had worked alongside Luke in his studio soon after he had moved across from England in 1934 (it seems likely that he would have seen the Ulster Unit exhibition later that year), exhibited a wood carving, *Mother and Child*, in the 1939 UAA exhibition.[188]

John Hewitt's preface in the catalogue which quotes Herbert Read, possibly with the intention of aligning the two Units even more closely, positions the Ulster artists within a generally unified context.

> …behind much apparent disagreement and diversity of opinion, a solid body of doctrine to which all actually subscribe can readily be crystallised.[189]

This assertion of a universal order that can be found within the visual world, suggestive of a transcendent meaning that can be communicated through the individual vision of the artist working in harmony within the essential nature of his materials, recalls the

[186] Nash, Paul, '"Unit One": A New Group of Artists', letter to *The Times*, 12 June 1933, p.10
[187] 'Irish Art and Modernism', p.73
[188] Hewitt still refers to Johnson as 'a good sculptor and a serious craftsman' in his 1944 essay 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists, despite the fact that he was more active as a painter by this time.
[189] Hewitt, John, Preface to Ulster Unit catalogue, 1934

writing of Clive Bell and Roger Fry so much admired by Hewitt and John Luke. The Ulster Unit positions Luke in a particularly modernist context, alongside painters such as Toogood, Mansfield and Charles Harvey, who all worked in a comparably formalist style.

Hewitt manages to bring design and craft into this same modernist context through an elucidation of shared abstract principles and a truth to materials, in a less overt repetition of the Northern Ireland Guild of Artists' statement of ambition. One would have expected Middleton to see in this connection between modern painting and design something of the integration of polarities that he subsequently discussed, but the short explanation he gives of his work seems to push the limits of Hewitt's explanation of the shared ground of the group.

> Symbols – developed in accordance with either a spontaneously established law or some definite formal stimulus.[190]

The ethos of the Ulster Unit demonstrates a respect for the craft of art that seems consistent with the Ulster Arts Club and the Guild of Artists. It still indicates in 1934 the situation in a city where many of those who made art also had to occupy positions as craftspeople, designers or teachers as there were limited practical opportunities to work as full-time artists. There is an emphasis on printmaking, with seven artists making linocuts, lithographs and etchings, which not only asserts an interest in graphic process but also ensures the availability of lower-priced work to a wide range of collectors. This sense of the importance of art to all people is evident in Hewitt's 'Notes on the Art of Picture Buying' in the catalogue, which sounds like a gathering-together of aphorisms from various authors. Perhaps the most notable in this context is the motto-like request to 'Have something in your house made by a human being for a human being', which asserts the importance of design, art and craft in a broad social context.

Looking back in 1977, Hewitt noted the 'importance of the profession of damask designing in providing a prop to unrelated creative activity among Ulster artists from the first decades of the century', and names as examples Hans Iten, John McBurney,

[190] Middleton, Colin, Ulster Unit catalogue, 1934

Charles Middleton, Charles Harvey, Colin Middleton, John McAllister and Sorley McCann.[191] Therefore the Ulster Unit was not only engaging with British modernism and its very particular contemporary aesthetic, it was also emerging from a society where commercial necessity required this connection between the artist and the artisan designer or craftsman. While many established artists in Britain, France and Germany made a voluntary aesthetic or intellectual decision to explore this inter-disciplinary engagement, it was an unavoidable fact of life for many of the Ulster artists that they would struggle to survive on the sale of pictures alone. As an advantage, however, for many of them their parallel industrial or commercial work had provided practical provision and opportunity to train and make art. The critic of the Northern Whig noted that the Ulster Unit exhibition 'touches problems of decoration on many sides', suggesting that it was widely seen within the context they themselves had set, of having a broader social relevance, rather than as simply another brief unification of young artists.

Clearly at this stage, Middleton was not unsympathetic to these ideas and was not reluctant for his art to be too closely associated with the influence of craft and design. In 1934 he was finding his place and his voice as an artist as much as he was still establishing himself as a professional damask designer in the wake of his father's absence from the business. The Ulster Unit contained many old friends such as Romeo Toogood, George McCann and Luke, and it also aligned Middleton with artists who had studied at leading art schools in London. Immediately this was seen as the most advanced group in Belfast.

> The members of this crusade are in revolt against the old order of things. They want a new artistic dynasty.[192]

With the possible exception of George McCann, who knew Henry Moore, Eric Gill and Jacob Epstein from his time studying in London, and who exhibited two abstract paintings in the Ulster Unit exhibition, Middleton was the most radical of this group, and the tangential nature of its alliances is demonstrated by the single exhibition the

[191] *Art in Ulster I*, pp.105-108
[192] *Belfast Telegraph*, 19/12/1934, 'New Spirit in Art: Exhibition by the Ulster Unit'

Ulster Unit held. John Hewitt blamed his own 'laziness and indecision' for its disintegration,[193] but there is little sign of these artists having shown together even as smaller groups beyond this venture.

The Ulster Unit exhibition not only defined the apogee within Northern Irish art of design, craft and art finding common ground within a definitively modernist context and with a particular aim, it also demonstrated Middleton's relationship to this ideal and his distance from it. The works Middleton displayed at the Ulster Unit reveal that his interest lay in content and meaning rather than purely in form.

While the use of symbols is a constant throughout Middleton's work, the type of symbol and their use and effect varies enormously. The paintings he included in the Ulster Unit exhibition appear to have been entirely non-representational. The Northern Whig discusses his three paintings with surprising sympathy, and the reference to Klee does indicate that Hewitt, who saw the same influence, might have had a hand in the review.

> 'Composition' (21) by Colin Middleton is noteworthy. The aesthetic relief provided by the incised lines on the flat surface is most satisfactory. 'Composition' (20) is rather vitiated by the reference to human profile, while 'Blue Composition' (22) is a pleasing pastiche related to the work of Paul Klee.[194]

His prints, to which the Belfast Telegraph referred, appear from their titles to have been more representational than the paintings. Their non-descriptive titles are consistent with the work Middleton exhibited at the UAA in the early 1930s, *Decorative Panel (Woman)* in 1931, a wood engraving and a painting both called *Composition* in 1933, as well as three works entitled *Drawing* in the next couple of years. It is interesting to consider that Middleton used the word 'decorative' at a time when he was still attending Belfast Art College. Perhaps he too was concerned with 'problems of decoration' and contemporary practice between fine and applied art, but equally it

[193] Handwritten note by John Hewitt on the catalogue for the Ulster Unit exhibition held in the collection of NMNI

[194] 'Present Day Art: Opening of Ulster Unit's Exhibition', *Northern Whig*, 18 December 1934, p.8

suggests that he had not yet considered this as problematic for his painting, which he was later to do.

The paintings of these early years are in some ways closer to those of the 1960s than the later 1930s. The forms that Middleton uses as symbols in these mid-1930s paintings are highly biomorphic and suggestive of the natural world. Their shape, texture and colour and their interaction contain the meaning of the work, either in what they recall to us on a subconscious level or else through the 'definite formal stimulus' to which the artist refers.

While one might see an obvious consideration and awareness of pattern and design within this, the forms only exist for what they lead on to. This suggests an interest in intellectual and psychological enquiry rather than anything more sensory and ultimately decorative. They are not related to the home or place within which they might eventually be sited, rather existing purely on their own terms. Middleton does not sit easily within the ethos of the Guild of Artists or even within the Ulster Unit.

2.1.3

In the second part of the 1930s Colin Middleton becomes almost invisible as an artist and John Hewitt is increasingly key to our knowledge of him, as he provided the only written memories of this period and the only contemporary criticism of his work. Very little of Middleton's work from before 1939 survives. Hewitt wrote that he 'painted and drew to the point of exhaustion' every weekend in the hut at Chichester Avenue, but there were few opportunities to exhibit or sell works in Belfast at that time apart from the Ulster Academy of Arts, of which he was made an associate in 1935, the same year he married Maye McLain at St Peter's Church on the Antrim Road.

While no photograph of Maye is known, it has been suggested that *Girl with a Fringe* (1941) might be a posthumous recollection of her. They had met while studying at the School of Art and by 1935 Maye was working part-time as an art teacher at Methodist College, where the head of the department was Charles Braithwaite. Braithwaite was

a central figure within the Arts and Crafts movement in Ireland and a member of the Guild of Irish Art-Workers, as well as one of the founders of the Ulster School of Arts and Crafts in Belfast, which opened at 7 Chichester Street in 1907 'with more stress on individuality than they believed was possible in the municipal school of art in Belfast'.[195]

Maye was also an artist, although the only record of her work being exhibited was in the 1938 UAA exhibition, at which she showed *Plaque*. One might conjecture from this and from the presence of Braithwaite that she was likely to be in sympathy with the ideals of the Northern Ireland Guild of Artists and Unit One, and is likely to have maintained, to some extent, her husband's alignment with this ethos. Perhaps her influence left him less frustrated with the design work that he carried out each day, as there is no record of Middleton exhibiting work outside the UAA between the Ulster Unit and the outbreak of war. Doubtless this was due to lack of opportunity as much as to choice, as no more avant-garde groups appear to have come together in the wake of the Unit.

From Hewitt we have some knowledge of Middleton's intellectual and aesthetic development at this time. He recalls him, in contrast to John Luke, being more interested in the ideas and theories surrounding modern art than in practical discussions about 'the materials and processes of painting'. His reading seems to have been consistent with Hewitt's and Luke's in terms of the more standard modernist criticism of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, whose formalist aesthetics might be seen as less crucial to Middleton than Luke.

Perhaps more significantly, Hewitt records Middleton's interest in Herbert Read, who in some ways seems to have become a model for Hewitt in defining his own role in Northern Ireland as a deliberate proselytiser of a specific group of artists who represented a broadly significant aesthetic and cultural dynamic within contemporary art. Hewitt notes in particular their shared interest in Read's *The Meaning of Art*, published in 1931, which discusses a remarkably broad sweep of art history in a manner that must have appealed to Middleton's own widespread interests and the cohesion of various influences within his work. Read's analysis of Surrealism as well as his interest

[195] Larmour, Paul, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, Friars Bush Press, Dublin, 1992, p.110

in Blake and Klee would have been important to Middleton, as would the further discussion of psychology and symbolism of *Art Now*, published two years later. Middleton's own work demonstrates his early awareness of Henry Moore,[196] perhaps gained from George McCann, who had studied with Moore in London and remained in close contact with his teacher even after his return to Belfast, but Read's enthusiasm for Moore and also Ben Nicholson might well have been significant to Middleton, whose passions as a young man seem to have been for European painting.

It is also likely that Middleton was very sympathetic to Read's political thinking. Middleton believed that the artist or craftsman should have a social role as much as any other worker within society and be 'a vital link in the social chain'. While Middleton might not have subscribed to Read's anarchist allegiances, his work from the late 1930s and the 1940s expresses anger about political systems and the poverty and wars that had emerged from these systems in the western world.

Hewitt also points out that Middleton's intellectual interests were quite different to those of Luke and that even he had difficulty with some of this reading. Jung was clearly a stumbling block for the poet. In some ways it points to Middleton's true nature being that of a symbolist rather than a surrealist in that Jung was much more significant to him than Freud, whose work had been absorbed within Surrealist doctrine. Hewitt admitted later that 'there seemed to be a whole area in psychology where I had no skill to follow him'[197] and in 1943, preparing for the vast exhibition of Middleton's paintings at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, he wrote to a mutual friend that he was about to read Jung and was afraid he would 'box my compass completely'.

> Colin has been finding clarification in his symbols and I'd like to know what it's all about.[198]

There is an air of cynicism in another letter written later that year after the exhibition closed.

---

[196] It was only in 1934 that Herbert Read published the first monograph on Henry Moore, so Middleton's awareness of his work is notable.
[197] Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast, 1976, p.17
[198] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 9 June 1943, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

> Most people over forty couldn't make head or tail of the symbolist stuff – any more than Colin can himself.[199]

Again, the difference in Hewitt's relationship with Luke is evident here. He presents the reading and subsequent discussions that he and Luke, and their friend W.J. McClughin, engaged in throughout the 1930s as a gradual and rational process of self-education in theoretical and practical aspects of painting. Hewitt admits that he struggled with their 'grinding thoroughness' but 'in due course I was, I believe, able to hold my own, and, although in the twenty years since our conversation subsided my ideas have altered and developed, nevertheless, they still carry the grain of the original mould from which they were extruded.'[200]

Hewitt makes clear not only Middleton's intellectual independence but also that he did not necessarily share Luke's deep interest in the 'materials and processes of painting'.[201] In all this we see an artistic and intellectual identity being formed that prioritises values that are not closely aligned to modernist aesthetics of craft and design and that clearly position Middleton as an emerging artist quite separate to Middleton the designer.

2.1.4

The 1930s seems to have been a transitional period for many artists in Belfast. Opportunities to exhibit or to sell work were extremely limited. Ten works were sold at the Ulster Unit exhibition, seven from the Pottery and Sculpture section. Luke and Middleton sold one print each. While the Belfast Arts Club gave way to the Ulster Academy of Arts, the Ulster Society of Painters, which had formed in 1921 to exhibit more traditional local painting, petered out in the mid-1930s.[202] In an address he gave

[199] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 10 October 1943, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[200] *A North Light*, p.55
[201] *Colin Middleton*, p.16
[202] *Irish Art and Modernism*, p.73

in 1939, John Hewitt claimed that 'Ulster was a very difficult place for an artist to obtain economic or cultural success.'[203]

Almost forty years later Hewitt recalled that William Conor, James Humbert Craig and Frank McKelvey were 'accepted as the north of Ireland's most prominent painters…until the late Thirties'[204]. Despite the number of promising artists who returned from studying in London thanks to scholarships from the School of Art, described by John Hewitt as 'young men and women' with 'their portfolios and heads full of new ideas',[205] whose experience and contacts ensured a much greater awareness of contemporary developments in the London art world, the lack of public support for the Guild of Artists or the Ulster Unit indicate that there was little opportunity to work as a full-time artist, particularly in a more modernist manner. There were some public commissions, mostly enjoyed by sculptors or stained glass artists, although John Luke was able to assist Morris Harding at the British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow in 1938.

Given the number of practising artists in Belfast in the 1930s, it is remarkable that more galleries did not emerge. There were a number of established woman artists working or exhibiting in the city, such as Kathleen Bridle, Olive and Marjorie Henry, Wilhemina Geddes and Violet McAdoo, some of whom also taught or worked in stained glass, as well as Rosamond Praeger, and other sculptors such as Morris Harding, Frank Wiles and George McCann. Paul Nietsche had arrived in Northern Ireland from Kiev in 1929 and became well-known for his bohemian appearance and lifestyle. Some were better known, such as Hans Iten, William Conor, Craig, McKelvey and Charles Lamb, and the younger generation included artists such as Middleton, Sidney Smith, Luke, Toogood and the other Ulster Unit members, as well as the Englishman Nevill Johnson, and Tom Carr, who returned from England at the end of the decade. Despite Hewitt's own occasional collecting and his encouragement of his friends and relatives to acquire contemporary works, there was little market for art. Belfast's most active collector, the

[203] John Hewitt quoted in *Irish News*, March 1939, review of Address on Art
[204] *Art in Ulster I*, p.98
[205] *A North Light*, p.78

remarkably perspicacious Zoltan Frankl, did not arrive in Belfast until the end of the decade.

Middleton continued to show at the UAA and was made an Associate in 1935. A small number of paintings from this period have survived, including one from 1936 and a number from 1938. The paintings shown at the UAA and the Ulster Unit are unknown. The 1936 painting and two of those from 1938 are non-representational with strongly biomorphic forms, both reminiscent of Miro but restrained in their palette and demonstrating a technical skill and a detailed surface. The small 1938 panel *Head*, which might be that described by John Hewitt as the first Middleton he purchased, can be read as a female head and torso and is more unsettling in its mood, although they remain playful and experimental while also highly controlled.

His interest in Miro at this time is notable not simply in aesthetic terms, but also as a possible extension of Middleton's interest in the Spanish Civil War. Like Hewitt, Middleton was a committed socialist and Spain was a cause that united them; the Hewitts had even taken in children orphaned by the conflict. Another surviving 1938 painting, *Spain, Dream Revisited* is his most open reference to the war, a painting of implied violence and oppression which takes aim at the role of the Catholic Church in Spain. It is one of the first works in which Middleton shows an interest in a more literary form of surrealism, more narrative-based than the earlier paintings using symbols in a pure, non-representational manner.

The Bride, of 1938, demonstrates a similar form of surrealism and also some repeated imagery from *Spain, Dream Revisited*, which might suggest it deals with the same subject. Despite their obvious interest in content, technically these paintings have a strong design basis. They are precisely drawn and highly linear, conscious of perspective and space and the repetition of shapes. There is little sense of texture or movement and much is done for calculated effect. Arguably, at this stage, Middleton draughtsmanship is more skilled, flexible and technically inventive than his painting and in its immediacy it suggests a greater maturity and, arguably, independence than his paintings of the period. The influence of Salvador Dali in these two 1938 works is clear; it is highly likely that Middleton would have spoken to Nevill Johnson, John Luke and Charles Harvey about their visit to the International Surrealist Exhibition in London

in 1936, at which Dali exhibited. Another painting called *The Bride* from the same year demonstrates a Dali-esque adeptness at the sexualisation of imagery and visual puns that subsequently become less noticeable in Middleton's work from 1939.

In discussing Middleton's painting in this style some years later, it is revealing that Edward Sheehy used terminology more associated with industry.

> Brushwork, which might have hinted at a human fallibility in the process of creation, was almost entirely eliminated…Line, for all its controlled fluency, had the apparently unerring precision of an engineer's blueprint[206].

The evolution of Middleton as an artist in these works demonstrates the early stages of the dialectic between the designer, with his very particular technical skills, and the artist, with his emerging intentions, emotions and considerations of expression. Middleton was intent on conveying his message as powerfully and strikingly as possible and it is notable that he was making work like this at a time when nearly all artists working in Ulster still drew their subjects from their surroundings. Like Hewitt, Middleton saw both local problems and the international situation as the territory of the artist, as well as the broader human condition. Middleton's experience of Belfast in the 1930s and in particular the linen industry which had been badly affected by the Great Depression, with high levels of unemployment, poverty and sectarian violence becoming commonplace as a result, can perhaps also be sensed in these works, but they reveal much about the general tension of the times.

But while Middleton's early work is often discussed in terms of a range of external influences, the most personal matters were to have the most profound impact on him. On 25th June 1939, his wife Maye died after a short illness. According to a friend of the family at that time, it appears that she had an inflamed appendix, which first became painful on the tram when she was returning to Chichester Avenue from her work at Methodist College. Not realising the source of the stomach pain, Dora Middleton is said to have brought her a hot water bottle to ease it while she was resting in bed and this

[206] Sheehy, Edward, 'Colin Middleton', *Envoy*, Volume 2, April 1950

affected the appendix badly and led to peritonitis.[207] It seems she died within a few months.

The same friend recalled that Dora Middleton was profoundly affected by Maye's death and blamed herself for not realising the source of the problem and for not having called a doctor immediately. There is hardly any description of Maye beyond her being quiet and friendly, and she appears to have got on well with the Hewitts, who were briefly living near Chichester Avenue in the late 1930s and often visited them in the painting hut. She and Dora Middleton were particularly close. Shelagh Parkes recalls that 'she never really got over the death of Maye from that point'.[208] Sheila Greene wrote in 1952 of this time, 'Middleton retreated to his mother's house, hid himself from the world and destroyed all his early paintings.'[209]

He also appears to have destroyed all Maye's own work, although she exhibited rarely and is unlikely to have been prolific. It is curious that a handful of works, such as *Spain, Dream Revisited*, appear to have survived and remained in the artist's studio. For some time after her death, by some accounts as long as a year, Middleton was apparently unable to paint, and it was only on a trip to what was apparently then a fishing lodge at Church Hill in Donegal, a house subsequently bought by the painter Derek Hill and which is now the Glebe Gallery, that he found it possible to work again. An understanding of this timeline and the work made around it is complicated, however, by the fact that a number of extant paintings are dated 1939, and it seems unlikely they might have survived what appears to have been such a dramatic cull. These are mostly slightly stylised landscapes reminiscent of Luke or Toogood as well as some Belfast street scenes and they might have been painted towards the end of the year, although their bright tones and often lively subject matter would seem at odds with Middleton's reported mental state at this time.

[207] Mrs Shelagh Parkes, interview with the author, 23 August 2016
[208] Mrs Shelagh Parkes
[209] Greene, Sheila, draft article for *Art News and Review*, September 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

2.1.5

Only ten weeks after Maye's death, Germany invaded Poland and war broke out across Europe. There was no conscription in Northern Ireland and although some of his friends, such as George McCann, volunteered to fight, Middleton did not. He was still living with his mother and was presumably reluctant to leave her; they stayed at Chichester Avenue despite the risk of bombing raids on the Waterworks nearby. Employed within the linen industry Middleton was involved in 'essential work'.

It seems likely, however, that his pacifist and socialist views were at the heart of this decision, although there is no documentation to confirm it. It is interesting that John Hewitt tried to sign up for active service but was turned down as he was in a reserved occupation and Nevill Johnson, too, who was a local representative for Ferodo, a brake linings company, was turned away for the same reason when he applied to join the RAF. Certainly many of Middleton and Hewitt's friends, including John Luke, did not join up and take part in what Hewitt described as 'the greatest imaginative experience of my generation'.[210]

The experience was also very much lived at home, although within Northern Ireland it remained a different experience from that of their neighbours on either side, in Britain or Ireland. The complexity of this period is evident in the wide range of art made in Ulster that was inspired by, or directly drawn from the wartime experience.

Roy Foster differentiates the experience of artists working in Ulster from those in the Free State, suggesting that 'their wartime experience was also one of withdrawal, removal, a certain absence from reality', while noting that as Northern Ireland was formally at war, unlike the south, they 'lived through a definitively different experience – including bombing raids'.[211] John Hewitt recalled in 1964 that during the war he 'felt

[210] *A North Light*, p.127
[211] Foster, Roy, 'Foreword', Dorothy Depner and Guy Woodward (eds.), *Irish Culture and Wartime Europe*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015, p.16

very enclosed and segregated, and then my thinking turned inwards.'[212] Kathryn White writes that 'While Europe's influence did not wane, the war years enabled the Belfast man whose mind had been broadened by European culture to now look at his own land with renewed vision'.[213]

In April 1941 the first bombing raids were carried out that became known as the Blitz of Belfast, in which more than a thousand people were killed across four raids. Over forty years later Middleton recalled the events of the Blitz and the impact it had on him in an interview with Eamonn Mallie.

> I suppose…talking of historical events, the most shattering experience I had was the 1941 blitz on Belfast. The air raid, the big air raid…it's one of things I've never been able to reconcile coming out after the all clear the next morning, an absolutely beautiful morning, and I lived up Salisbury Avenue in those days, looking right out over, over to the line of the Old Park Road and Clintonville, and there was this beautiful, this deep cerulean blue sky and the whole fringe of that was a mass of chocolate-coloured smoke and flames. And I have never been able to settle in my mind how anything so hideous could be so beautiful.[214]

Writing in 1944's *Now in* Ulster, John Hewitt noted that Dillon and George Campbell were represented in the publication by 'pictures of the Blitz, surely the event of our time with the harshest impact – at anyrate for those of us who have not fought'.[215] While the death of Maye forced a profoundly personal shift in Middleton's work and his sense of himself as a painter, the Blitz gave him an even deeper sense of the people and the world around him, and a sense of their shared bonds of suffering and of hope. White's comment, perhaps written with John Hewitt in mind, might as accurately have been describing Middleton at this time.

Colin Middleton's paintings of Belfast could be used to map his travels around the city he knew intimately. He never owned a car, so he walked, cycled or occasionally took a

---

[212] See Quarto 7 (1980-81), Hewitt, Collected Poems, p.xlix
[213] White, Kathryn, 'John Hewitt and the Art of Writing', *Irish Culture and Wartime Europe*, p.47
[214] Colin Middleton, unpublished interview with Eamonn Mallie, 1983, courtesy Jane Middleton Giddens
[215] Hewitt, John, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', *Now in Ulster*, Arthur and George Campbell, Belfast, 1944 p.33

tram between the Antrim Road and the offices of Page and Middleton in Donegall Square South or the various mills for whom they worked. No extant paintings or drawings of Belfast seem to pre-date World War Two by more than a few months. Middleton's process in engaging with particular places tended to be through a slow absorption, often across a lengthy period, of visual aspects of the physical location as well as recollections of mood, events, even a fleeting occurrence that provided the focus for a specific painting. Although some sketches survive, these do at times seem to be invented at least in part, so he might not actually have made many drawings on his journeys through the city .

This intermittent series of Belfast street scenes painted between 1939 and 1947 are very different from any previous images of the city. William Conor, a friend and near neighbour of Middleton at that time, evoked a mood and spirit in Belfast that recorded the daily life of the city, the routine of work and leisure. His work is both direct and caricatural, evocative and occasionally crude, creating types that read across from their particular situations into an evocation of the entire city, although the hardship and vulnerability of many of its inhabitants is often softened by the camaraderie of the city's terraced streets. The habits of his work, such as depicting people with their mouths open caught in the middle of a laugh, a shout or a yawn, is reminiscent of Degas as well as suggesting the influence on painting of early twentieth century photography.

Catherine Marshall describes 'Conor's ability to transform the mundane and impoverished experiences of life during two world wars into something at times heroic, always smiling.'[216] For John Hewitt he was a 'proletarian painter without protest'[217] and this alliterative phrase is supported by an undated watercolour, *Two Mill Girls*, in which the two smiling girls walk away from the mill which is shown as a small detail in the corner.

For Middleton, however subtly, there is protest, although his paintings of Belfast have also been described as sentimental. They signal an engagement with the city that was

[216] Marshall, Catherine, 'William Conor', *The Hunter Gatherer*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2004, p.23-4
[217] *Art in Ulster I*, p.95

so crucial to him and the minutiae of life they depict is reflected in a poem Middleton wrote in January 1940 that seems to recall memories of his happy Belfast childhood:

> I read the number on the door / then gently ring the bell- Its distant tinkling makes me think of other bells as well – … a push-me-twice on a stop-me van/ and buy the child a chill. / The child plays with a coloured ball,/ a curious thing to do -/ my coloured thoughts bounce after it…The coal, the child, the dancing bear, / the pawn-shop down the street –'[218]

Certainly these paintings seem to demonstrate a very different artist from the work before 1939. Painted in a distinctive style, somewhere between Impressionism and Divisionism, employing a muted palette and allowing occasional glimpses of canvas to show through, many of Middleton's Belfast pictures seem to emerge from the early days of the war and then the change from anxiety to horror in the nights of the Blitz. It is a significant and revealing body of work, although it was only a part of his work for much of that time.

As with the death of Maye, it has been suggested that Middleton stopped painting for some months after the bombing of Easter 1941. It is unsurprising that both events were so traumatic for him and made him question his painting deeply. Despite the Donegal landscapes painted on family holidays and the paintings made while accompanying his father around Belfast, these straightforwardly representational cityscapes appear to be a dramatic change of direction from the deliberate engagement with an internationalist modernist aesthetic that defined Middleton in the 1930s.

This is, however, perhaps a simplification that ignores the complexity of this engagement and some of its roots. A number of bright, simplified and rather naïve street scenes from 1939 were probably painted before Maye's death; comparing a group of these it is obvious that they are largely invented compositions built up of elements of Belfast's urban architecture and using a non-naturalistic palette. They demonstrate an interest in formal compositional structure, in which the details of the houses and shops and the inhabitants seem incidental to the complex arrangements of the painting. In some cases, the manipulation of space and the interlocking of planes

[218] Colin Middleton, *Poem on a door-mat*, January 1940, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

within these works are closer to Cézanne than to the artists more usually associated with Middleton in the late 1930s and reveal his interest in acquiring a deep understanding of the theory and practice of European modernism, rather than adopting the superficial aspects of various current styles.

The 1939 paintings do not seem to convey any particular emotion, if they are removed from the context of Middleton's life, or any notable interest in the people who inhabit them, both of which are central to the later series. The shift between the two series of urban paintings appears to occur at some point during 1940, with technical changes and an emphasis moving towards a people-based narrative and away from more abstract arrangements. *Pitch and Toss* or *Allotments, Belfast*, both painted in 1940, could perhaps be read as Middleton moving away from personal grief towards a broader concern with the people around him and the impact of the war as well as broader social conditions. The artist is no longer imposing himself on the city; he is noticing the lives of others. These paintings become images of shared emotion, both pleasurable and difficult, with a suggestion of shared places, history and culture. John Hewitt noted this when discussing *If I Were A Blackbird* (1942) with T.P. Flanagan.

While appraising its pigmentation and cunning coupling of colour and tone what, he declared, gave the painting its permanent life was that trail of a song through the title, which can only be heard in the heart.[219]

It is in these works that Middleton's political awareness becomes more locally focussed. The 1938 canvases that were inspired by the Spanish Civil War were bound up with what appears to have been a desire to create radically modernist work that would have been controversial in Belfast. His mother disliked these paintings and John Hewitt claimed in 1939 that this 'work of extreme revolutionary content' would 'if shown in other towns…create riots'[220]; it is likely that the Belfast paintings would have been seen as less challenging. As a partner in Page and Middleton, Colin Middleton occupied a respectable position within Belfast's extremely conservative society and was dependent on work provided by the industrialists who would arguably have been

[219] Flanagan, T.P., 'The John Hewitt Collection', *A Poet's Pictures – A Selection of Works of Art Collected by John Hewitt*, Shambles Art Gallery, Hillsborough, 1987, p.12
[220] John Hewitt quoted in Newsletter, March 1939, lecture to Rotary Club, 'Contemporary Art in Ulster'

most threatened by his radical social views even if not his radical art.[221] William Blake, one of Middleton's heroes as a painter and a poet, expressed his own 'passionate hatred of oppression by government and by the ironmaster and millowner, and so on',[222] and in this series of works we can read one aspect of Middleton's vision of Belfast and his attempt to deal with the ambiguity of his own position.

It is interesting to consider these as the first works of Middleton's in which there is an active emotional engagement. There is anger in the Spanish Civil War paintings but it is arguably a little over-intellectualised and detached to become central to their effect. The second phase of Belfast paintings are full of quiet compassion, recording the details of everyday life at a point when it must have seemed most threatened and vulnerable. In the connection he makes with the people he saw every day on his travels around city there is a sense of kinship and community, and the idea of community for Middleton and many of his generation took on an increasingly politicised meaning. One review of his first solo exhibition, in which a number of these cityscapes were included, demonstrates a political reading that is revealing of the mood of many in circles similar to Middleton's at the time, although it is probably not a reaction to the works which was widespread or which Middleton might have found particularly relevant.

> There are nearly twenty pictures of Belfast, working class streets…You will say to yourself, 'if an artist can find beauty in capitalist squalor, what great subjects lie ahead in the socialist state, when men plan their cities and their lives?'[223]

Coal Quay, Early Morning, of 1940, might have been a nostalgic memory of his father and their painting trips to the docks. Middleton records life around the Lagan, the allotments, the boats, people out walking, the bridges that cross the river, as well as the inner city. Factories and mills are hardly present in these works, despite their overwhelming presence in the city and the lives of those in these paintings.

---

[221] It is interesting to consider that Edwin Bryson commissioned Nevill Johnson's surrealist 'Linenscape' in 1943 and that Zoltan Frankl and Anny Lewinter were in many cases the earliest significant collectors of young Ulster artists.

[222] Pevsner, Nikolaus, *The Englishness of English Art*, Penguin, London, 1976, p.149

[223] 'Art', (unknown author), *Unity*, 2 October 1943

If I Were A Blackbird shares the complex geometry of the 1939 streetscapes, but its tonal subtlety and the gently broken paint surface integrates this within the overall effect of the work. These paintings are ambiguous in their intention. Middleton's background was very different to that of William Conor and despite his empathy for the people he paints, these women who dominate the works with their heads and shoulders often draped in shawls always exist within the context of the city, enclosed in the terraces where they live. These individual figures are signifiers of the women who lived and worked in Belfast, as much as the houses and off licences are signifiers of the built environment of the city that was directly related to its industries, all abstracted to symbols yet still easily readable within Middleton's subtly simplified manner of working.

These are often seen as paintings that do not relate to Middleton's earlier work or else an unrelated, group of works that he was making alongside them. Kenneth McConkey refers to Middleton as a 'Northern Irish Euston Road painter'[224] and it is certainly an interesting comparison in terms of a depiction of urban life in the period on either side of the war, but Middleton's Belfast is very specific. It reflects the traumatic personal and public events of 1939 and 1941 in the very avoidance of a literal depiction of them, while demonstrating a growing emotional engagement in his work with the people and places around him. There is arguably also a more skilful approach to painting than is evident in some of the works of the late 1930s, as well as a broadening-out of his own use of symbols.

Middleton was not one of the artists employed by the War Artists Advisory Committee to produce extensive records of the period in Belfast and it is interesting to compare the paintings he made at this period with those of official War Artists working in Belfast such as William Conor or Doris Blair. Conor actively recorded all aspects of the home front in Northern Ireland: aeroplanes, air raid shelters and wardens, evacuees, the recruiting and training of soldiers. Doris Violet Blair was a younger artist whose more modernist work was admired by Middleton, but her wartime work recording the effects

[224] McConkey, Kenneth, *A Free Spirit: Irish Art 1860-1960*, Antique Collectors' Club and Pyms Gallery, London, 1990, p.81

of the Blitz, as well as the lives of soldiers and others involved in war work is more documentary in nature.

There is no literal evidence of the events of war in Middleton's paintings of this period, although occasional drawings do demonstrate the destruction of the Blitz. As with Nevill Johnson, while they have the freedom to avoid describing the war, its impact is expressed powerfully within their work. Northern Ireland's unique position undoubtedly reflected a greater ambiguity in the political and moral attitude of some of its inhabitants to the events of the war. While Johnson considered that he should become involved in the events of the time in some direct and active way, he was uncertain as to which of the many groups he disliked were actually his enemy, and what were the motivations that he should follow.

> Primitive defence of hearth and home I understood; I would rebut fascism from any quarter – but fight now for whom? For what? For King George, Mr Chamberlain, the 'B' Specials, the old school tie, the bums and bobbydazzlers?[225]

Middleton had equally uncertain allegiances; while he had been strongly anti-fascist since the Spanish Civil War, both his future father-in-law, William Giddens, and Middleton's friend Bruce Barr appear to have seen the opportunity for the USSR to become more dominant in central and western Europe after the war and it seems likely that Middleton would have shared their views to some extent. In December 1947 Bruce Barr, still clearly seeing the possibility of western Europe embracing communism, wrote to Middleton that 'factory management and industrial planning' in Russia was effective and that the element of coercion had been over-emphasised by British writers, before adding that 'The Red Army will have to be maintained.'[226]

[225] Johnson, Nevill, *The Other Side of Six*, Academy Press, Dublin, 1984, p.46
[226] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 5 December 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

2.1.6

The ambiguities and uncertainties of the wartime experience in Belfast can be read to some extent in these paintings of the city. Rather than being a separate body of work from the more stylised and invented paintings of the same period, they can be read together. The symbolic use of the female archetype, with its very personal resonances for Middleton, is explored more completely in the work shown in his 1943 exhibition at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, as is the increasing conflict between Middleton's identities as artist and designer. The street scenes are also interesting counterparts to a painting such as *Strange Openings*.

While this powerfully individual work could be read as a response to the Blitz, stylistically it appears more closely related to a series of austere, highly simplified Belfast paintings from slightly earlier in the war, such as *Off-Licence* and *Fish and Chip Shop*, probably painted after Maye's death and apparently affected by it.[227] The three-arched church in both these works connects *Magdalene* (1939), which also seems to be driven by his recent loss, with a stark depiction of the city where they lived, with its leafless trees and deserted streets. *Fish and Chip Shop*, unusually, includes a factory within the elements of the cityscape, alongside a pawnbrokers, a row of houses, a fish and chip shop and a church. Modern life is reduced to these core elements, but there is little clear sense of commentary from the artist in these works. The emphasis on design and the highly-finished surface lend them a sense of detachment that is perhaps misleading, given their place within the artist's life. These works seem to relate to a small number of paintings of single female figures, such as *Muriel* or *Jou Jou*, which date from late 1939, which share their ambiguous and slightly unsettling mood and in which the urban environment is uncomfortable and uneasy.

Strange Openings shares various hallmarks with these works, but while clearly a wartime painting it also indicates an unusually explicit response on Middleton's part to the effect of industry on the city. The buildings here are highly stylised but it seems likely that a significant influence in their composition has been the York Street Spinning

[227] This also appears consistent with the date noted in a condition report in the Colin Middleton files at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, where it is noted as 1939. I have not been able to inspect the painting.

Mill and its immediate environment. Page and Middleton regularly produced work for the York Street Mill and the area would have been familiar to him for many years as it lay between the art school and Chichester Avenue.

The glass in its windows had been painted black early in the war to conform with regulations for the black-out (after the mill was bombed in 1941, black felt was placed across the windows).[228] As with many of Middleton's images of Belfast, much of what might seem invented was taken from the actual reality the artist saw. The mill or factory building in *Strange Openings* is placed in a striking proximity to the terraced houses around it, overwhelming and voracious in its relationship with them, its various doorways and windows providing a rather biomorphic feel. Unlike other street scenes of the time, colour is used with intensity and in a highly emotive manner, dominated by reds and blacks. This is an image of the dehumanising force of industry, depicted as if it is about to devour the surrounding houses; there are no people in this painting, or in this austere early wartime series, and their roles have been taken on by buildings which represent different forces within the city.

This image is closer to German Expressionism of the inter-war period or even to modernist film or stage sets, than it is to Surrealism, and it could be compared to Johnson's painting of the early 1940s, *Byrne's Pub*, in its heavily stylised evocation of the oppression of the vulnerable within the contemporary urban experience. Otherwise, it is difficult to find parallels for the ambitious modernist language and social comment within the work of his contemporaries who also depicted the city at this time and for whom the factory and its environment was accepted and only remarkable when it became visually notable, such as in John Turner's *Blackout: The Old Flour Mill*.

Middleton used his modernist surrealist language and aesthetic to challenge the position of the traditional industrial powers around him; this is his strongest and most overt comment on the impact of industrial Belfast on the lives of its inhabitants. It is also, ironically, the point at which he comes closest in his painting to the modernist

[228] Topping, William, (ed. O'Connor, Parkhill), *A Life in Linenopolis: Memoirs of William Topping, Belfast Damask Weaver, 1903-1956,* Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 1992, p.49

machine aesthetic of the early twentieth century, while remaining distinct from its celebration of mechanisation.

A poem of this period powerfully reveals Middleton's distrust of the 'Big Machine' of an international, industrialised society; towards the end of the war it is clear that his preference in the post-war world would be very different to the spread of western capitalism.

> These are not men, / these are the living-dead/ that populate a madman's fantasy…we, / who fling a weekly pittance in their faces / to keep our cleanly conscience right / with God.
>
> The Big Machine won't miss them…[229]

Strange Openings symbolises Middleton's own personal sense of oppression as well as the broader social and creative problems he saw as the result of industrialisation.

The friendship between Hewitt and Middleton continued throughout the war. Hewitt discusses Middleton's poetry as well as his painting in his correspondence with Patrick Maybin. In June 1941 his work seems to Hewitt to be 'deeper in content and less sympathetic'[230] before he goes on to say with some insight

> I should hazard a guess that Colin's at a climacteric in his development. The logic of his growth has brought him here. He must go on or return ponderously into repetition. I believe he will go on. But it will be a period when he will have to be alone, when it will be hard for others to appreciate him.

He records in October that Sidney Smith introduced a collector to Middleton and tells Maybin that a poem of his, 'No Weary Traveller' will be published in *The Bell* in February. On 19th January 1942 Middleton visits the Hewitts for lunch; the shortages of canvas and turpentine are making him consider 'turning to sculpture to ease his feelings'.[231] He is 'deliberately trying to eliminate the strictly pictorial elements as he

---

[229] Colin Middleton, untitled poem dated June 1941, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[230] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 22 July 1941, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

[231] Some surviving works of this period are painted on a thicker and coarser canvas than Middleton would generally have used.

believes his art should be separate.'[232] By December Hewitt considers that 'Colin paints better and better'.[233]

John Luke had left Belfast for Killylea, near Armagh, after the Blitz, where he and his mother joined the Johnsons at Knappagh Farm, and in his absence Middleton seems to have become the city's significant contemporary painter in Hewitt's opinion. Despite the war there appears to have been an increasingly lively artistic scene in Belfast. The UAA exhibitions continued through the war and in 1940 Middleton was one of Four Ulster Artists in an exhibition held at premises in Waring Street, showing alongside his friend Sidney Smith. It was, however, more than ten years since Colin Middleton had begun to exhibit publicly in Belfast and, despite a prodigious output of work during that time that had established him as the city's most progressive painter, his career as an artist must have appeared to have made little progress. Any possibilities of pursuing this career more seriously are likely to have appeared remote, particularly in the middle of the war.

[232] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 20 January 1942, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[233] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 9 December 1942, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

CHAPTER TWO, PART TWO

JOHN HEWITT (CONT.)

2.2.1

In June 1943 John Hewitt wrote to Patrick Maybin, 'Colin is to have a One Man show in the Gallery in September. The first local man to have the chance. He'll have over 100 pictures. I'd love to have Clive Bell and Wilenski over to see it.'[234]

A mutual friend, Edwyn Kirkby, wrote to John Hewitt about the forthcoming exhibition, in which he clearly saw the latter's hand.

> I have been so glad to hear that Colin's one-man show at Stranmillis had been definitely fixed. Both in quantity and quality I have no doubt the show will amply justify his backers. This, too, has been an act of very practical friendship.[235]

During the early years of war, the Museum's collection had been moved to safety in a village in County Antrim, a precaution which was proved invaluable by the widespread destruction of the city in the 1941 Blitz, and the gallery spaces had been covered in sand as an anti-incendiary device. It was decided to re-open in 1943 and, no doubt largely due to Hewitt's influence, Colin Middleton was asked to provide the first exhibition. It seems surprising that this prestigious opportunity, the first occasion on which the Museum had presented an exhibition by a local contemporary artist, was given to a comparatively young painter who still worked as a damask designer and was little-known outside the more adventurous art circles in Belfast. There were more established, renowned and widely popular artists in Northern Ireland and it is perhaps indicative of Hewitt's increasingly distant relationship with Luke that he, presumably, recommended Middleton. It is possible that, four years into the war, there was little official interest in such decisions and too small a staff and budget to consider an exhibition that might involve loans and transport, so that the range of alternatives

[234] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 9 June 1943, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[235] Letter from Edwyn Kirkby to John Hewitt, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/4/1/1/5/4

would have been limited. Hewitt did, however, write in 1947 that the Museum was making a 'determined effort' in active encouragement of our younger artists',[236] and referred in the same article to the 'methodical programme of exhibitions, not least among these the "One Man" shows by local artists'.[237]

In April 1943 the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery had acquired Middleton's quietly elegiac *October: Annadale Embankment* and perhaps they expected the entire exhibition to be composed of similar works. While there were a number of these impressionistic Belfast street scenes and some other more decorative work included in an additional section of works, grouped together as 'Miscellaneous', described by Middleton as 'worthy of place on their individual standing', these were 'of insufficient significance to be included in the primary work'. This was 'Opus 1, complete in eight groups, of a process of personal integration'.[238]

This was the first solo exhibition Middleton had held and it included the majority of the paintings that he had completed since destroying nearly all his earlier work in 1939. It was remarkable in its scale and in its artistic and intellectual ambition, particularly in the context of contemporary painting in Northern Ireland, and was a clear statement of intent by Middleton, who was to refer to himself four years later as having 'established the reputation of being the only contemporary spirit in Ulster painting worthy of rank with cross-channel painters'.[239]

This exhibition also provides us with Middleton's first extended written statement of his intentions as an artist and the most expansive and ambitious demonstration of how these manifested themselves within his painting. Crucially, it introduces the dialectic that appears to have been a driving force in Middleton's art and its development between, in its broadest terms, his identities as an artist and as a designer. The consistency of this dynamic is supported by the fact that many of the ideas and theories

[236] Hewitt, John, 'The Belfast Gallery', *The Studio*, Volume 133, January-June 1947, p.23
[237] Ibid, p.24
[238] Colin Middleton, *Note on One-Man Exhibition*, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, 1943
[239] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Middleton Murry, 1 March 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

Middleton explored in this first exhibition were ones to which he returned in subsequent decades

The introduction that Colin Middleton wrote to this first one-man exhibition survives, together with a typewritten list of paintings, some of which are dated. Curiously the 'General Conditions' produced by the museum 'governing the holding of "One Man Show" exhibitions by Ulster Artists' states that 'no printed catalogue is to be issued' and adds 'Any explanatory material which would assist public appreciation or understanding of any work to be available only at the discretion of the Curator'.[240]

In demonstrating the internationalism of Middleton's conception of art and his position as an artist, as well as his independence within a local cultural context, this dense two-page note he compiled because of 'requests for elucidation regarding the nature of my work' is remarkable. He even added a suggested bibliography that ranged from Jung to Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen* (a story divided into seven parts, much of it stages of a journey, just as Middleton's progress through his Opus 1 is divided into eight parts).

The idea of integration is examined within the note in the context of these paintings, but beyond this exhibition, in many ways, it became the defining element within his development as an artist, and while taking on various dialectical forms I would argue that at the heart of it remained Middleton's dual identity as a designer and as an artist. To see Middleton's constant search for integration across different bodies of work is to understand more fully the continuities and also the differences within his art. It remained an issue beyond this exhibition. In 1952, at a time when his work was quite different in technique and style and, to some degree, in subject matter, Middleton commented to Sheila Greene, in response to an interview commissioned for *Art News and Review*, 'Each painting is a link or several links in the chain of its particular group. Every so often we produce a masterpiece or integration piece which joins hands with the circle of links, so completing the group…When this happens one has, by the subtle

[240] 'General Conditions governing the holding of 'One Man Show' exhibitions by Ulster Artists', Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

alchemy of the need which brought all this about, changed one's self, perhaps only a mite, perhaps a great deal.'[241]

In the same correspondence Middleton writes, 'I insist, above all else…Whilst every canvas should be sufficient unto itself, it is, whether we deny it or not, also another stepping-stone on the path of integration.'[242] It is remarkable how little his language has changed since the note he wrote in introduction to the 1943 exhibition when he referred to the 'social chain' and described the eight groups of paintings of which it was made up as 'the outcome of an unconscious will to perfect 'the link' as a necessary stage in the perfecting of 'the chain'.' He writes of the chain in symbolic terms as 'a shackle, or a symbol of co-operative strength: a linking of hands, hearts, minds: of purpose: of perfection, having neither beginning nor ending, and therefore transcending survival'.[243]

The seventy-four paintings, divided into eight groups, that are the core of this exhibition (forty-one other unrelated paintings, mostly street scenes or single figure paintings, were included in the 'Miscellaneous' section) were described by Middleton as forming his Opus 1. As he was interested in music it is likely he would very consciously have used a phrase suggesting that these seventy-four paintings share a single coherent purpose and identity, marking the beginning of his mature creative work (despite the fact that he had been exhibiting regularly in Belfast for over a decade), and that they form only the first part of a process that will continue through other works.[244]

The significance of the number eight within this process is explored in one of the books to which Middleton referred in his note, Harold Bayley's *The Lost Language of Symbolism*. According to Bayley, 'the number 8 has from most ancient times been the emblem of regeneration…According to Swedenborg, 8 'corresponds to purification' and the octagonal form of Christian fonts is said to have arisen from this.'[245]

---

[241] Letter from Colin Middleton to Sheila Greene, 12 September 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[242] Ibid.
[243] 'Note on One Man Exhibition', *passim*
[244] Only one work belonging to Opus 2 appears to have been painted.
[245] Bayley, Harold, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, Barnes & Noble Inc., New York, 1952, p.46

In an essay written in 1945 Middleton's friend Lionel Bruce Barr, also the first husband of his second wife Kathleen, commented that 'His work is the expression of a search for liberation, for that integration of the personality which is the goal of the mystic'[246], while an anonymous and mysterious article about the 1943 exhibition that, given its insight into these challenging pictures, is likely to have been written by Barr or another friend for possible publication, entitled *One of the Public to Colin Middleton*, describes Opus 1 as 'the story of a soul groping in the darkness for some pantographic vision, of the making and the scrapping of various integrations and of the coming of the Dawn.'[247] Bruce Barr wrote, 'Shortly after the beginning of his search Mr Middleton suffered a deep personal loss, and the resolution of this sorrow threads its way through some of the painting on exhibition.'[248] This interweaving of the personal with the universal, of emotional engagement with intellectual detachment, can be interpreted in Middleton's work at most stages and this duality is crucial in understanding it as an ongoing search for integration.

The early years of the war were clearly a period of deep self-analysis while Middleton was unable to paint and possibly because of this he came to realise the importance of the act of painting within the process of healing. Middleton later considered the idea of 're-birth' important as a prelude to a deeper understanding of life and of passing through pain and anguish as necessarily connected to discovering spiritual truth and re-building a 'truer' life. He discussed this with Sheila Greene in 1952 and, interestingly, the passage is completed with the idea again of integration.

This belief provided the synthesis for Middleton.[249]

Analysis, revelation and painting were inseparable for Middleton. Opus 1 explored what Sheila Greene referred to as his 'dark night of the soul' [250] and expressed his pain and his doubts in a deliberately universalised symbolic and pictorial language. Matters of personal significance are given the broadest, least specific meaning. *The Wilderness: Mother and Child III* might be read in terms of Middleton's grief not only at the death

[246] Barr, Lionel Bruce, *Paintings of Colin Middleton*, 13th May 1945, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[247] Anonymous, *One of the Public to Colin Middleton*, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[248] *Paintings of Colin Middleton*
[249] Greene, Sheila, Draft of essay on Colin Middleton, 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[250] Ibid.

of his wife but also at the loss of their child during pregnancy;[251] the pain of grief, however, transcends even this own deep personal significance and becomes a powerful image of the impact of the war. *The Yellow Door* explores Middleton's political cynicism and concerns at the difficulty of establishing the way forward for post-war society, but beyond that it also becomes a vision of a world without certainty or stability in which we cannot rely on any of the structures or institutions that should provide support. *The Oracle* seems to relate to our search for meaning and understanding within this world, while *Consumatum Est* probably refers to the moment that Christ died on the Cross but also becomes an expression of human doubt in the redemptive power of faith, the terror of being in a world that has abandoned God and the absence of meaning without this faith. It is notable that this work was painted in 1942, after the Blitz of Belfast and at one of the darkest points in the war.

Middleton sees only futility in the violence of the war. He questions the meaning of human life in a universe that is full of destruction. 'Where was the *caritas* of the Creator if the heart's desire must be frustrated by physical annihilation?'[252] To use the language Middleton himself preferred, we could read this as the thesis that is the first stage of this process of integration, the setting out of one question, or one position, that will then be answered.

While his work at this period is usually considered surrealist and at times he himself described it as such, it is reasonable to argue that the very consciousness of the decision-making within these paintings distances them from the supposedly irrational qualities espoused by the surrealists. Sheila Greene comments on the 'smooth technique of the Surrealists'[253] evident in these paintings, but perhaps more telling is Edward Sheehy's analysis that ''Middleton's early pictures…seem to me to be inspired by a passion for synthesis, for a transcendent and incorruptible order. Where the Surrealists used the elements of reality to break down the normal data of consciousness, to extract the ultimate *frisson* from the outraged senses, Middleton

[251] Information from Jane Middleton
[252] Greene, Sheila, Draft of essay on Colin Middleton
[253] Ibid.

sought to create a private world which would be, as it were, a challenge to the world of reality, a world independent of the senses.'[254]

2.2.2

While Middleton appears to be setting out various aspects of the world around him as well as his own physical and spiritual nature, whose pain and chaos have formed and populated the landscape of these paintings, we can also read them as an analysis of his identity as an artist

There is a contradiction at the heart of the paintings that demonstrates the unreconciled creative identities that Middleton was to attempt to integrate throughout his career. On the one hand these works exemplify the technical skills that he had learned as a designer, which had endowed him with an imitative ability that allowed him to become aligned with the most recognisable surrealist style of the moment. There is the highly finished paint surface that Sheila Greene notes and the 'unerring precision' of line that Edward Sheehy had compared to an 'engineer's blueprint'.[255] But there is something striking and almost disturbing in the gulf between the exacting and often pedestrian discipline of damask design and the dramatic unleashing of the imagination that is evident throughout this exhibition. The world Middleton creates, breaking down the physical reality and certainty of the familiar into a series of unsettling and emotionally charged tableaux, demonstrates the force of a creative impulse that is held in check until the weekend provides an opportunity for the artist to liberate it.

In a poem written shortly after his father's death in 1933 he had described 'The youth who left his father's grave, a man possessed of new possessions to possess, an endless

[254] Sheehy, Edward, *Colin Middleton*, Envoy, April 1950
[255] Ibid.

quest for equilibrium…'[256]. At this moment Middleton not only took on a new role in relation to the people and the physical world around him, as breadwinner and business partner, but also had to examine a psychological element of his creativity that his father represented but without any apparent struggle, his twin identities as a designer and as an artist. It was perhaps at the point of his father's death that Colin Middleton had to confront the permanent presence within him of this creative dialectic.

Both extremes of this question are examined within these Opus 1 paintings. There is the assertion of an independent identity that is separate from design. But within the same images there remain very deliberate and specific references to the process of damask designing. In *The Sister Voice*, for example, an irregular rectangular patterning runs across the lower part of the landscape in a manner that suggests the warp and weft effect of a loom and a thin fold of fabric tying the figure's hair reinforces this suggestion. A similar abstract pattern occurs across one of the watch-tower-like buildings in *La Belle Suzanne*, while the figure in *Symbol of Circulation* wears a checked dress that ties behind her back in a twist of fabric. Such effects were not present in the surviving paintings preceding 1939.

There are a number of interpretations of the deliberate use of this effect in many of these early paintings. It is something about which Middleton never appears to have written. It is possible that it is some sort of semi-conscious 'leakage' from his work as a designer, a habit of hand and visual organisation with which he felt comfortable and an opportunity to demonstrate a skill that he enjoyed. It might also have assisted him in a process of abstraction by providing a non-rigorous, sub-Cubist organisation of form and space in a partially flattened picture space. Middleton had, however, proved in the 1930s that he could paint and work in an abstract manner without this. The preparation, organisation and execution of works was a very deliberate process for him. It is likely that the deliberate integration of these elements within his paintings was an acknowledgment of his identity as a designer and an attempt to locate it within the more creative identity he sought as a painter.

[256] Hewitt, John, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976, quoted p.14

This training as a designer had inculcated in Middleton exceptional skills of draughtsmanship that are often referred to by writers and which had a strong relationship with his paintings. A review of the exhibition noted that it also included 'a large number of drawings in pen, pencil or wash, including portraits, landscapes, natural and fantastic, and figure studies, which reveal the artist's ability in linear work.'[257] It would have been unusual at this time to include drawings within such a significant exhibition, but it reveals another aspect of Middleton's difference from many of his contemporaries.

He continued to make drawings that he exhibited in their own right, but the use of drawing as the basis for his painting manifested itself also in the small sketches he appears to have made towards every painting in this exhibition, a habit that was to continue well into the next decade. These are small, broadly described drawings in thick pencil, usually dated, outlining the basic composition of a painting. Their relationship to the process of design is strengthened by the border that is drawn around each work. The habits of preparation and conception and sense of design that these drawings reveal suggests that Middleton's manner of working as a painter was still evolving from his training as a designer, much as he might have been assessing how to paint in the light of this practice.

Certainly in the technical skills evident in these paintings, Middleton seems to be embracing his training and professional background, while within the group he is perhaps also demonstrating its expressive limitations and creative frustrations. Within the enormous range of themes and ideas that form his Opus 1, Middleton also appears to be setting out the dialectic at the heart of his own creative identity.

To return to his introductory notes to the exhibition there are suggestions that this personal element within the thesis he appears to present is entirely deliberate in its significance. Having emerged from the socially ambiguous class of designers to industry and with a strongly politicised sense of social responsibility, Middleton felt that artists should contribute to society and have a place within it in the same manner as any workman. He is also likely to have been interested in the Marxian idea, developed from

[257] *Work of an Ulster Artist*, untraced newspaper review

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), which placed spiritual awareness and experience within reach of all people, which could be seen to make the spiritual journey taken through Opus 1 entirely relevant to the modern industrialised city; this relevance to all within society makes a political point within a highly abstracted creative process. This social ideal and Middleton's search for a useful place within it as an artist returns in other guises at various points in his life.

The role of the damask designer to the linen industry can also be read in broader social terms. Certainly Middleton was conscious of the relationship of industry to society and also of how beneficial art or design might be within this. The ideas and emotions with which Middleton grappled in these paintings were, for him, of universal relevance and significance. An anonymous 'special correspondent' wrote in newspaper article on this exhibition that the paintings 'will give meaning to you if you are patient with them…and you begin to think thoughts you did not know you had'.[258] Perhaps by finding a way to include the skills learned from design and to manipulate them towards more expressive ends there is an attempt to find a synthesis that clarifies and justifies this role, which he was required to continue to support his mother and their household.

Middleton asks in his note, 'Is the craftsman to be a vital link in the social chain?' before setting out the antithetical potential roles of the artist: entertainer or visionary, profiteer or prophet and dispenser of opiates or healer. Ultimately, Middleton concludes, the artist needs to be as strong a link in the social chain as any other link and he proposes his Opus 1 as an attempt to perfect the link in the ongoing work to complete the chain. Even if Middleton's own dialectical identity as an artist is central to these paintings and to the integration of thesis and antithesis, through the paintings of his Opus 1 he sets out a complex series of challenges that deal with his own self-awareness and his relationship with the world.

> Briefly then, the underlying problem of Opus 1 is a first endeavour to harmonise the seemingly opposed and conflicting tendencies in human nature – in the relation of self to surroundings (male/ female, physical/ spiritual, hand/vision, heart/mind, personal / impersonal etc.,) and to attain, in that union,

[258] 'Painting', Specially Contributed, untraced newspaper review

Individual personality; that is, a making whole of all that one body may contain

Insight into the relation of self to selfishness

Insight into transient and eternal values[259]

Personal integration becomes central to universal harmony and places all people within the same struggle, with the same potential achievement and resolution. Middleton locates the symbol at the heart of this process of enriched understanding through individual change. The symbol endures and does not change but our interpretation of it alters as we ourselves are altered by the experiences of our life. Middleton claimed that the symbols he came to use in Opus 1 were entirely his choice of what seemed most effective and appropriate, but that he subsequently came across much the same set of symbols discussed by Jung and by Harold Bayley in *The Lost Language of Symbolism*. It is interesting to recall Middleton's short note in the Ulster Unit catalogue, describing his work as 'Symbols: developed in accordance with either a spontaneously established law or some definite formal stimulus'.[260]

The artist's emphasis on symbols was noted by critics writing about the exhibition, with one writing that 'his symbolism, despite certain obvious affinities to modern psycho-analytical formulae, is overladen with historical geographical and literary significance which are not commonly intelligible'.[261] Another writer suggested that 'the recurring use of symbols – such as the lamp, the human eye, and the threefold arch – will attract his attention….some psychologists say they play an important role in the "world of dreams" or fantasy'.[262]

Middleton's paintings do not reject other artists and writers; rather he seems to envisage this process as one in which all significant creative figures are joined. Even by 1943 the question of influence and originality in terms of Middleton's work had been raised, but his relationship to other artists is expressed as an entirely positive and necessary part of the artistic process. He states that he is not concerned with schools but only with individual expression and he often seems to value more highly those

[259] *Note on One Man Exhibition*
[260] Middleton, Colin, catalogue for *The Ulster Unit Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, Belfast, 1934
[261] 'Variety Keynote at One-Man Show', *Northern Whig*, 8 September 1943
[262] *Work of an Ulster Artist*

figures who sit outside any conventional grouping; there is certainly no attempt to align himself with any particular contemporary ideas or trends as Middleton often places his work in a more historical context.

It is telling that William Blake (1757-1827) is the dominant inspiration to whom Middleton refers in both letters and interviews over a long period. Much as William Morris represents the designer who is also an artist (and a writer), Blake represents, again like Middleton, the poet who is also an artist. He could also be seen as the revolutionary from an industrial world who aspired towards a utopian earthly paradise (although Morris is again an interesting comparison here). Blake's revolutionary forces have a primitive power that is distinct from Middleton's unity of the people, but he does add a further dimension to the image of the archetypal female that becomes so important in Middleton's work at this time and onwards, presenting this as the progenitor of the new force of revolution.

> The Eternal Female groaned! It was heard over all the Earth.[263]

In 'The Argument' from Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* we can perhaps discern his influence on Middleton's notes for the 1943 exhibition, for example in his list of opposites:

> Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.
>
> From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.[264]

The interaction of the two is essential; in *The Voice of the Devil* Blake describes the body and soul as 'two existing principles', 'That Energy, called Evil, is alone from the Body: and that Reason, called Good, is alone from the Soul.'[265] Middleton does not accept this enduring separation but rather sees a union between them. Bruce Barr, in the essay referred to above, wrote, 'Blake as poet and painter waged war on duality but in doing so had to have recourse to terms which imply dualism', but makes clear

[263] Blake, William, 'A Song of Liberty' from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
[264] Blake, William, 'The Argument' from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*
[265] Blake, William, 'The Voice of the Devil' from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

that he believes Middleton finds no division between 'the kingdom of heaven within' and 'the realm of earth about him'.[266]

This doctrine of contraries is also very relevant if we examine the female archetype as it appears in these eight groups of paintings, compared to its subsequent evolution in Middleton's work. Around half way through Opus 1, in the paintings that date from the summer of 1942, we see a small series of paintings identified as a group by the word 'Cinderella'. Alongside these are paintings such as *The Return* and *The Discovery*, which depict similarly innocent and colourfully clothed young girls. There is an obvious consistency between this female image and the central character of Gerda in *The Snow Queen*, as well as the many versions of Cinderella that Harold Bayley discusses in *The Lost Language of Symbolism* (he notes that 'Under the auspices of the Folk-Lore Society, 345 variants collected from all parts of the world have been published in book form'[267]). Within these variants Cinderella often possesses healing power or is synonymous with wisdom, and Bayley notes the derivation of her name in part from the Greek 'Ele', which means shiner or giver of light'.[268] One of the Cinderella paintings from Group VI, painted in 1943, is subtitled 'Lucy', making a particularly clear reference to Bayley's writing on the Cinderella story; he identifies that 'In Jutland, Cinderella is named Lucy, from *lux*, light, or *lucco*, I give light. Lucy, derived from the same radical as *Luna*, the Moon…means 'a shining child born at sunrise or daybreak''.[269]

The symbolic importance of Cinderella's clothing, to which many of the variants of the story refer, does perhaps help to explain the strongly patterned clothing worn by the girls in *The Return* and *The Discovery*, and adds weight to the importance of design or decoration within the symbolism of the work while also becoming a signifier of this transcendent female power. Bayley writes that Cinderella's supernatural and mystical dresses seem unquestionably to symbolise the awakening, growth and final apotheosis of Wisdom within the mind'[270]. The young girl in *Lucy* wears a blue dress and Bayley

[266] Barr, *Paintings of Colin Middleton*
[267] *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, p.180
[268] Ibid., p.192
[269] Ibid., p.193
[270] Ibid., p.196

describes the importance of the colour blue as a symbol of truth, holiness, sanctity, chastity, happiness and transcendence.[271]

The power of these girls lies in their very innocence and purity, and both Andersen and Bayley connect this with the redemptive power of Christian faith. When Gerda and Kay have returned home, her grandmother reads to them from the Bible, 'Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven',[272] and Bayley identifies variants of the story in which Cinderella, who 'sits among the cinders and keeps the fire alight, is a personification of the Holy Spirit dwelling unhonoured among the smouldering ashes of the Soul's latent, never totally extinct, Divinity, and, by patient tending, fanning them into flame'. [273]

While these paintings present innocence as the key to the power of the female archetype, in the paintings of the late 1940s and 1950s Middleton posits this same quality represented and literally embodied by a series of women who are defined by the depth of their experience of life and particularly by the transformative experience of suffering. Edward Sheehy described the figure in *Teresa* as 'the accustomed victim of years of petty cruelties and petty tyrannies' but recreated in the painting with 'such warmth of pity and depth of understanding that it brings to light an obscure but abiding spiritual beauty'.[274] According to Middleton, through experience she has reached a 'state of awareness right on the threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven'.[275] These oppositions were not only explored by Middleton within Opus 1; as here, the idea of the dialectic remained crucial in the development of his work and explains his return to the same subject after a gap of some years, to be treated in an entirely different manner.

While Middleton admires Blake as a visionary, a writer, painter and revolutionary, it is perhaps in Hegel, to whom Middleton refers indirectly in relation to the work of this period, that we find an even clearer indicator of his sense of process. He presents his paintings as containing the dialectic of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. There are the

---

[271] Ibid., p.211-212
[272] The Book of Matthew, Chapter 18, Verse 3
[273] *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, p.194-5
[274] Sheehy, Edward, *Colin Middleton*, 'Envoy', Volume 2, April 1950, p.
[275] Middleton, Colin, note on *Teresa*, 1949, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

three female figures of *The Poet's Garden*, the three hills of *The Sister Voice* or the three arches of *The Yellow Door*, one of which is reversed, perhaps relating to how Hegel's concept of an ideal universal beauty, equating to spiritual perfection, has been damaged by the violence and division of the world.

These eight groups of painting appear to have been presented in a generally chronological order and in many cases the catalogue noted the month in which they were painted. Arguably the sense of movement, of progress towards synthesis is marked in the transformations that can be noted between works. In this group of paintings the concept of integration sees the individual (Middleton) suffer and endure hardship (described by him as the wilderness) to be able to return in closer harmony with nature and understand the 'Earthly Paradise' in truer spiritual terms.[276]

Middleton writes of the importance of symbolism within these paintings, the ability of the symbol to absorb alternative meanings and interpretations while also indicating the permanence of a spiritual truth within reach. This concept of the role of the symbol could also be applied to the manner in which symbols refer both to the ideas and dialogues within his paintings and also to the events of his own life. Middleton refers to the symbol as 'constant'; its significance is infinite and also relative to our own understanding and therefore our own enlightenment and awareness.

In considering the symbol in a very personal context for Middleton, it is also interesting to consider the relationship between the imagery of some of these works and his immediate environment. The landscape depicted in a number of these works is not a generalised barren surrealist wasteland, borrowed from Salvador Dali (1904-1989) or Yves Tanguy (1900-1955), but rather could be read as an inventive re-interpretation of the world immediately around him, through which Middleton could explore and express his own personal difficulties and uncertainties. Middleton creates a vision of the city and of his surroundings that suggests destructive forces and violence that clearly reflect broader issues of the time, such as the Spanish Civil War and the outbreak of the Second World War.

[276] John Hewitt owned a copy of William Morris' poem *The Earthly Paradise*, which he and Middleton might well have discussed, as its ideas can be discerned in Middleton's painting.

In these works he takes up and deconstructs the Victorian buildings of Belfast before placing them into incongruous surroundings, as if to question the power of the industrial city around him through this de-contextualisation. The church which the Middleton family are likely to have attended according to a family friend[277] (although there is little evidence they went regularly to church) and, perhaps most significantly, also the church at which he had married Maye,[278] St Peter's on the Antrim Road, is recalled in the 1939 painting *Magdalene*, which was the first painting in Opus 1 and the starting point of his journey into the Wilderness. The landscape of *The Yellow Door* suggests Scrabo Tower, while its buildings also recall the repeated shapes remembered from the terraced houses off the Antrim Road. As in *The Dark Tower*, which seems likely to have been inspired to some extent by the Blitz, in the early sections of his Opus I the world around Colin Middleton seems to have become a hostile and unstable environment. In addition these can be read as subtle suggestions that, beneath its apparent prosperity and security, Belfast is on the verge of collapse, a city where the social and economic structure established by its industrial might is meaningless.

2.2.3

Middleton's specific journey through these paintings is from the pain and isolation of 1939 to the renewal he found in 1942 through Kathleen Barr. She and her husband, Lionel Bruce Barr, were both aspiring poets and Middleton's friendship with them appears to have begun around the end of 1942 or early in 1943, when they were living at Ringneill, near Comber. It is impossible to date these events precisely, but a painting in Group VI of Opus 1, number 54, *My Heart's in the Highlands*, painted around January-February 1943, was said to be painted for Kathleen. There is no record of exactly when or how they met, although Jane Middleton recalls her parents discussing Bruce Barr commissioning Middleton to paint Kathleen's portrait, which was never completed, if it was ever begun.

[277] Mrs Shelagh Parkes, interview with the author, 23 August 2016
[278] Jane Middleton Giddens, interview with the author, 2 September 2016

Bruce Barr was born in England and had read History at Oxford before coming to Northern Ireland to work in the Civil Service to avoid what he described as 'London bourgeois administrators',[279] despite his determination to become a poet. On 9th October 1939, the Civil Service Commission for Northern Ireland issued a Certificate of Qualification in favour of Lionel Bruce Barr as Assistant Principal; three months earlier Kathleen Giddens had joined as a Clerical Assistant Grade 2. They married in 1940 but the stormy nature of their relationship is indicated by some of Barr's poems of the time. 'To Kathleen at Dundonald', written in 1941, begins 'O turbulent head' and a year later he titled another work 'Moody Mistress'. The latter could refer to one of the 'intrigues and loves affairs experimented with' between 1942 and 1944, according to his own later admission,[280] and the problems in their relationship are unambiguously expressed in 'Song for Kathleen', dated 1943.

> My love and yours for me / Which kept the world's course true / Lingers, but wearily / Nor can its term renew

Whatever the circumstances, Middleton seems to have been welcomed into their house and their lives, and a lengthy poem written by both the Barrs in 1943 gives a sense of the confusion and ambiguity of this period, concluding with a dedication that gives a sense of the unusual relationship between the three of them as it was in July of that year.

> The end of 'Over my Shoulder' written for and under the direction of Colin Middleton, painter, poet and man and dedicated to him by the two people who have watched this grow from nothing into something.[281]

The early sections of this poem might almost describe the evolution of their three-sided relationship, from an initial friendship between all three of them to the stage of Colin and Kathleen falling in love, at which point it becomes clear that this bond between them would endure. The opening lines 'Well met, Colin, on the road,/ Day shall know him, night shall bless' soon turns to 'Colin has turned the house upside down/ With the

[279] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 13 October 1947
[280] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 8 August 1947
[281] Barr, Lionel Bruce and Barr, Kathleen, *Over My Shoulder*, unpublished manuscript, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

sun in the cellar and coal in the roof/ We are twisted sideways like half-a-crown', to the anger and resentment of Part 4, 'Colin Astray'.

> coming where he is not wanted / Because his sky high tower is haunted / …People who choose a world of towers / Should build stout footpaths down to ours…

There is the bucolic mood of 'Colin Makes Hay'; 'Ruffles her hair/ Rumples her dress/ And lies and dreams of the wilderness/ Two cider apples side by side/ Turns from sleep and cuddles the bride…' and then the worry of 'Tell Me, Colin?', 'I am weary for the message you do not bring'.

At this time the Barr's second daughter, Peggy, had just been born; the elder, Alison, had been born in 1941. By the autumn of 1943, as he prepared for his exhibition, Colin wrote to Kathleen from Lavery's Bar in Belfast (about half way between the Page and Middleton offices and the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery) to confirm that he would meet her, presumably at Ringneill, where she and Bruce seem to have been living, on the next Saturday morning. This letter was written on a Monday; Middleton must also have spent the previous weekend with them, as he writes, 'I was very happy yesterday: it is a long time since I heard Bruce laugh the way he did yesterday afternoon.'

> Kate, is there something in you that feels strangely confident about us? I seem to be aware of a new kind of central purpose where you are concerned.[282]

The recurrence of the mother and child imagery of this series of paintings is perhaps indicative of Middleton's statement about the enduring power of the symbol in revealing a different meaning when the viewer, or the artist, is himself changed. When he began his Opus 1 Middleton had recently lost his wife and they had lost a child in pregnancy; the image of the mother and child is tortured, angry and full of pain. In the later paintings in this group the use of the same symbol seems to be connected with ideas of fecundity and the healing cycles of the earth.

The anthropomorphic figures acting out dramas on a post-apocalyptic earth amongst damaged and unstable buildings, which we see early in Opus 1 in paintings such as *The*

[282] Undated letter from Colin Middleton to Kathleen Barr, Colin Middleton Archives, NMNI

Coming of St George or *The Dark Tower* or *The Oracle*, have taken on human form again, and establish the female archetype that is to dominate Middleton's painting from this moment. These figures play or work in a richly productive and brightly coloured landscape. They are closely integrated pictorially with the landscape and are presented as part of a shared natural harmony. It is interesting to note the pairs of children that occur in a number of these paintings and to consider whether their representation might have some echo of Kathleen Barr's two young daughters, whom Middleton was to bring up as his own.

Middleton's symbols become a key to understanding the transformation through this journey, as has the consistent mood of the words used in the titles of the last groups of Opus 1: sanctuary, awakening, harvest, ascension. Early in this sequence the references Middleton makes to the Bible are to the suffering of Christ, *Via Dolorosa* or *Consumatum Est*, for example; in later groups *Annunciation* and *Visitation* suggest that we have arrived at the moment of rebirth having passed through suffering, in the same manner that the death and resurrection of Christ completes our understanding of the meaning of his birth.

In the same way as he describes the role of the symbol, its enduring circularity and power of re-invention and revelation, Middleton explores the circumstances of his own life at the time of these paintings to place his understanding of it in a broader philosophical and psychological context. The ongoing nature of this process of understanding and revelation is intriguingly suggested by a painting that represents his first interpretation of another Biblical subject in *The Woman of Samaria*, which he was later to revisit in the 1949 painting *Give Me To Drink*; a drawing with the same title was used amongst a sequence of sonnets Middleton wrote in 1947 and sent to John Middleton Murry.

2.2.4

For Middleton, Opus 1 set out and explored the idea that was central to his vision of life, the synthesis or integration of opposing ideas or forces, explored and reconciled through the symbolism of his paintings. It also reflected his own reconciliation with life, asserting the need for suffering as part of the process of enlightenment and liberation that can then allow a spiritually enlightened acceptance of the harmony of mankind and the earth.

There is also an apparent pictorial symbolism in the use of pattern and material within Opus 1. It is difficult to know whether this use was entirely conscious, although it is interesting in this context to note that the *Northern Whig* review of the exhibition, possibly written by John Hewitt, refers to the unique 'patchwork of Donegal tweeds'[283] that recurs throughout these paintings. This places the theme of fabric design in Opus 1 within a local context that also relates it to the local landscapes in a shared narrative, but it is much more multi-faceted and significant than this.

For example in *The Discovery* the colourful material worn by the girl on the right is reminiscent of Henri Matisse's evocative and abstracted use of design and pattern[284] but, again like Matisse, similar patterns spread out across the other elements in the painting, in this case a dreamlike landscape, within foliage and fields, not only interconnecting the specific meanings of figures and the natural world, but also suggesting that the contrived, artificial harmony of design shares qualities with, or even reflects or is shaped by, the more organic harmonious activity found in the natural world. Is this the first stage in Middleton's search to integrate personal fulfilment and awareness with 'the universal physical aspect of the survival of the species'? It was in essence this problem that he set out in his first letter to John Middleton Murry, to explain why he and Kathleen wanted to be involved in the community farming venture which I will discuss in the next chapter.

As Opus 1 proceeds and as Middleton's own experience of suffering in, and then returning from, the Wilderness is examined within the paintings, there is a definite shift in the manner in which he is working. It is necessary to approach this with care when

[283] 'Variety Keynote at One-Man Art Show'
[284] See Henri Matisse, *La Musique*, 1939, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, for a particularly close comparison.

discussing such a varied and extensive group of works, but if we compare the technique of, for example, *The Coming of St George* or *The Fortune Teller*, which demonstrates Middleton's remarkable technical skills, described in the Belfast Telegraph's review of the exhibition as 'a technical loveliness that is disarming',[285] recalling the 'beautifully finished' surfaces and 'finely moulded' images that James White wrote of in *The Studio*, to later works within Opus 1, for example, *Thinking of Antwerp*, *The Skylark* or *Lucy: Cinderella No.4*, there is a definite change.

The invisible brushwork becomes visible, there is a clear distinction between passages of paint so that small sections of the canvas are occasionally left unpainted, abbreviated sequences of flat areas of colour combine to form images and, in the second of these three paintings the brushstrokes begin to form their own pattern, with the radiating impasto around the sun recalling Middleton's early and continuing love of van Gogh. Technically, they are occasionally closer to the 'impressionist' Belfast street scenes that were painted around the same time. It is not a stylistic paradigm shift but even when the highly finished paint surface recurs again, as in *The Sister Voice*, the interlocked geometric pattern that recalls damask design is integrated as a crucial element within the painting.

This shifting and ambiguous, but very personal, symbol determines much about the paintings it is part of. The later works in Opus 1 often become gentler and less stark than paintings such as *The Dark Tower*, arguably defining a mood that might have been characterised as more feminine. The linen industry had evolved from a domestic activity associated more with women than men and the industry it had grown into had a workforce that was still dominated by women and girls, although they predominantly worked in the mills and in the less skilled and highly paid jobs. The more skilled jobs, in contrast, including the maintenance of machinery, design and factory and business management appear to have been all occupied by men.

Therefore, although the domestic consumer of many these items and the one who probably selected them would have been female, the decisions regarding taste and decoration were taken by men. Middleton's three identities, as linen designer, painter

[285] 'Variety Keynote at One-Man Show'

and poet, were not necessarily considered typically masculine roles but there is no evidence that he was conscious of this in any way, even in the middle of a war when so many of his contemporaries were in uniform. It is interesting to see in these paintings, however, an increasing integration of both male and female identities in the less hard-edged and more decorative style of these paintings as they moved towards the end of Opus 1.

Middleton had been forced by circumstances into a complex dialectic, but it provided a driving force for his painting. While the 1943 exhibition was a highly ambitious attempt to examine and resolve this, in less obvious ways it was played out across the next forty years of his painting. All the seeds of his later development are already to be found here; it is interesting that John Hewitt, who saw this exhibition and would have discussed it at length with Middleton, always regarded criticism of Middleton's subsequent changes of style as largely irrelevant.

Despite the challenging and complex nature of the exhibition, public reaction to it appears to have been generally positive. Robert Greacen, in his editorial for *Northern Harvest*, wrote that Middleton's 'recent Exhibition in Belfast was one of the most exciting and delightful one-man shows in modern painting.'[286] Given the venue for the exhibition and the evidently serious intentions of the artist the local critics produced considered responses. John Hewitt's summary for Patrick Maybin of the public reaction also indicates that he remained unconvinced by Jung, although he did describe it as 'a wonderful show'.[287]

> There was a good deal of interest and debate. Most people over forty couldn't make head or tail of the symbolist stuff – any more than Colin can himself.[288]

More formally, in the first draft of his memoirs, Hewitt wrote about the exhibition and its significance.

---

[286] Greacen, Robert, 'The Editor Says…', *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing*, Derrick MacCord, Belfast, 1944

[287] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 8 September 1943, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

[288] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 10 October 1943, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

> For those in the community who cared about these things it was now clear that Middleton was already our most considerable painter, and for the artist himself the exhibition had incalculable value.[289]

It was certainly an intense period for Hewitt, when he described himself as 'up to the neck in Colin's exhibition' and arguably it marks the point at which his ideas began to be expressed through the work and the example of Middleton rather than through that of Luke, whose increasingly individual theories on painting were, in Hewitt's opinion, becoming problematic for the development of his work (Hewitt commented rather disparagingly to Patrick Maybin on a 23 page letter on aesthetics that Luke had sent him in January 1944).

2.2.5

Middleton was not only in Hewitt's correspondence as a painter and poet, however. In October 1944 he hints that 'Colin is selling pictures and changing his mode of life',[290] before clarifying in November that he had moved to a cottage at Ballyhalbert with Kathleen Barr. The relationship between Colin, Kathleen and Bruce appears to have continued until the autumn of this year without it becoming public knowledge beyond a small group of friends. Bruce Barr recalled the complex situation in 1946.

> …what I was looking for in Betty in Aug 44 was a mistress and something more to balance an almost unbearable situation where two people I loved were creating a situation not quite foreseen by me. Ifs are stupid but I did think in terms of an emotional relationship between us all with two pairs in matters other than common understanding and affection. I never stopped loving Kathleen, just as I never resented Colin.[291]

[289] *A North Light*, first draft
[290] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 23 October 1944, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[291] Letter from Bruce Barr to Kathleen Middleton, 3 September 1946

In 1944 Middleton illustrated Barr's volume of poems *There Was A Child*. Then in August 1944 Bruce Barr began a relationship with Betty, whom he was to marry in 1945, and late that autumn Colin and Kathleen moved into a house at Ballyhalbert owned by Nevill and Noelle Johnson. John Hewitt covered the details of the scandal in a gossipy letter to Patrick Maybin, mentioning the strain that this had put on Middleton's relationship with his mother. Kathleen Middleton recalled this too in a later piece of writing, while Shelagh Parkes also remembered Dora Middleton's disapproval of the relationship, particularly as Kathleen was still married and already had two young children.

Kathleen and Bruce Barr seem to have drawn Middleton away from Hewitt's circle to some degree. This was partly geographical, as they were living some way outside Belfast (the catalogue for a 1944 exhibition held in Sydney comments that Middleton was 'not given to café lounging and art talk. Dashes off to a remote cottage where he paints an amazing number of canvases'[292]), but also based on the fact that Hewitt appears not to have taken the Barrs as seriously as writers as they might have wished. Barr seems to have known Hewitt slightly and it is possible that his introduction to Middleton even came through Hewitt or a mutual friend. While Hewitt continued to encourage Middleton's poetry and to recommend it to editors, he does not seem to have done the same for Kathleen or Bruce. Remarkably, Bruce and Betty remained close with Colin and Kathleen, although this does not seem to have been due to Bruce's interest in his children. Even in 1949 Middleton commented in relation to Barr's proposed essay on his painting, that he was 'the only man who knows me intimately enough to tackle such a job'.[293]

It seems likely that the intense, politically radical and creatively ambitious world of the Barrs drew Middleton further away from dividing his life into design and painting, and accepting that he would have to subordinate painting. They pulled him away from his mother and also away from the more practical approach to creativity espoused by John Hewitt, who balanced his roles as a poet and writer on art with impressive public positions. They also appear to have shared Middleton's interest in Jung, which Hewitt

[292] *Irish Contemporary Art*, David Jones Gallery, Sydney, 1944
[293] Undated letter from Colin Middleton to Maurice Fridberg

did not try to follow. When Hewitt visits Middleton there is a sense that he feels rather peripheral to the group.

> Last Friday Geoffrey Taylor was up in Belfast doing a broadcast as from West regional. We took him round to Colin's in Rugby Avenue and sure enough didn't Bruce Barr and his wife (pregnant) call in. So there they all were Colin, Kathleen; Kathleen's first husband and Kathleen's 1st husband's second wife. It's altogether fantastic.'[294]

Despite this he remained crucial to Middleton's career, particularly as Hewitt's position in the local art world was becoming increasingly prominent. The British Council consulted him about a travelling exhibition to Algiers, Cairo and Jerusalem and he brought their representative to see Middleton's work in March 1944.[295] Around this time, Hewitt and Middleton, alongside the photographer and painter Arthur Campbell, were selectors for the Belfast Feis exhibition that opened in May.[296] In September Hewitt visited him, presumably still at Chichester Avenue, and recorded that 'Colin is painting away in a rather rougher style: landscapes turning into reclining female figures – somewhat more Gothic.'[297]

There certainly seems to have been increasing activity in the Belfast art scene around this time. A slightly younger generation of artists, largely self-taught, such as Daniel O'Neill, Gerard Dillon and George Campbell, were emerging and occasional small exhibitions were taking place in shops and even in private houses, such as that which Nevill and Noelle Johnson held in their house at 11b Botanic Avenue during October 1944. This was characterised as a 'Salon des Indépendants' by the Belfast Newsletter, and was described as a 'new art venture, sponsored by Madame Nevill Johnson, who is French and interested in everything connected with art…The pictures and portraits are by young modern artists who represent no particular group'.[298] Middleton sold a

---

[294] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 6 September 1945, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

[295] It appears that Middleton sent four paintings and two drawings to the British Council in April 1944, of which all but one were returned, although there are no records of this tour having occurred.

[296] Black, Eileen, and Simpson, M.Lesley, *The Art of Down*, Down County Museum, Downpatrick, 2011, p.60

[297] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 22 September 1944, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

[298] *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 October 1944

painting (probably *Rhapsody on a Black Bottle*) for £30 in that exhibition and another for £50 in December.

This appears to have been the second occasion on which the group of Ulster artists who were later to exhibit with Victor Waddington had shown together, following the Belfast Feis;[299] as well as Johnson himself and Middleton, George Campbell, Dan O'Neill and Gerard Dillon were all included in the 'Salon'. Improvements in the local art scene were noted by Dr R.H. Hunter, a friend of Hewitt's, who opened the exhibition and 'commented on the manner in which the appreciation of art had improved in Belfast'.[300]

Johnson was almost an exact contemporary of Middleton, born in 1911 but, like the younger trio of Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill, born in 1916, 1917 and 1920 respectively, he had virtually no formal training as an artist. In some ways Middleton, whose years of part-time study at Belfast College of Art had not led on to any full-time training, is caught between the previous generation of Ulster artists, most of whom had studied in London, and this younger generation, who embodied a very different attitude to making and exhibiting art.

Despite this emergence of this group of younger, self-taught artists, John Hewitt seems to have seen a dominant group developing at this time that remained largely an extension of the 1930s scene. In a short article on Middleton in *The Bell* in August 1942, illustrated with a geometrically abstracted ink drawing of smoking factory chimneys, he picks out Luke and Middleton as the 'most accomplished' of the small group of three or four leading young artists in Ulster, admiringly describes the 'sheer fecundity' of Middleton's invention and concludes that 'he is the possessor of the most richly equipped visual imagination and the most extensive capacity for invention now working in the north'.[301]

---

[299] Middleton had exhibited three paintings in the Feis, alongside George and Arthur Campbell, Dillon and O'Neill, as well as Nevill Johnson, whose *Kilkeel Shipyard* was lent by Hewitt's friends Wesley and Marie Lutton.

[300] *Belfast Newsletter*, 3 October 1944

[301] Hewitt, John, *The Bell*, Volume 4, August 1942, pp.338-9

Two years later he expands on this group in 'Art in Ulster', published in an *Anthology of Ulster Writing*, picking out Luke, Toogood, Sidney Smith and Tom Carr, as well as Middleton, as 'outstanding in accomplishment'.

> Colin Middleton has a multiplicity of manners unified, for all their seeming diversity, by a dynamic intensity of imagination. A lively and interesting landscape painter…he has also proved to be the best Northern exponent of abstraction. His most vital contribution, however, is to be found in the series of symbolic arrangements of figure groups which presents the deepening sequence of his imaginative revelations…[302]

Even in 1947, with the younger generation led by Dillon, Campbell and O'Neill beginning to establish themselves in Dublin, Hewitt picks out Middleton, Luke and Tom Carr as the 'most mature' of the younger artists encouraged by the Museum, as if circumventing any challenge to his judgement, and the hegemony of his own position, by prioritising maturity.

2.2.6

Hewitt was able to organise another boost to Middleton's growing reputation in the mid-1940s, when he arranged for the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts to hold an exhibition of his friend's recent work later in 1945. Middleton's first solo exhibition in Dublin, at the Harry Street Gallery run by Tom Nisbet, took place in April 1945, a mixture of symbolist works, landscapes and Belfast street scenes; almost half these paintings had been shown in Belfast in 1943. There was a brief report in the *Dublin Magazine*, and in 1970 the *Irish Times* critic recalled the work as 'totally Dali-esque, rather startling at the time, but quite perfect technically'[303] but it was to remain Middleton's only Dublin exhibition until 1949, when he began to exhibit with Waddington.

---

[302] John Hewitt, 'Art in Ulster', *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing*, p.146
[303] *Irish Times*, 8 October 1970

> Your show is over and adds up to a rather sad tale. For some reason, or on account of no reason…the Press failed to respond. Public interest is slowly mounting…and most of the people who know anything have come and been unfeignedly enthusiastic. But I have only one sale to record…[304]

The separation between the small avant-garde circles in Ireland and, in particular, between artists working in the north and the south at that time, is exemplified in an *Irish Times* review of Middleton's Dublin exhibition alongside an exhibition by Nick Nicholls, an English poet and painter who had moved to Dublin at the beginning of the war,[305] at the White Stag Gallery, headlined 'Two Surrealist Painters'. The White Stag Group had been set up by Basil Rakoczi and Kenneth Hall, also Englishman who had come to Ireland to avoid the war, and they had been actively exhibiting their own work and that of the expatriate and local artists who had gathered around them in Dublin since April 1940.[306] Given the surrealist and symbolist sympathies expressed in their work, as well as their enthusiasm to provide a focus for the avant-garde in Ireland, it seems surprising that they did not recruit Middleton or were not approached by him, but there appears to have been no contact. An explanation might be found in John Hewitt's opinion of the Group when he was asked to deliver a lecture to them late in 1941, probably during their large exhibition which opened in November.

> I had to meet and met a group of modernist artists. Mostly English escapists – one in sandals with white sox, 2 in tweeds, one with side whiskers, one with a beard and dirty knuckles – all slightly bald and largely neurotic. Their pictures I had hoped to be symbolist in manner, Irish in content. But instead they are bogus, naïve, sterile abstracts, reclining women, after Picassos, after Klee, Miro, utterly irrelevant to place and time.[307]

Middleton's connection with Tom Nisbet, who also painted, might have arisen from an exhibition of *Irish Contemporary Art* held at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney in the summer of 1944, in which both exhibited alongside a diverse group that included Paul

---

[304] Letter from Tom Nisbet to Colin Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[305] Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism*, Institute of Irish Studies, Q.U.B., Belfast, 1991, p.93
[306] Ibid.
[307] Undated letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

Henry, Letitia Hamilton, Maurice MacGonigal and Christopher Campbell. In 1945 Middleton also began to exhibit with the recently-formed Irish Exhibition of Living Art; he is likely to have seen the need for a larger audience and buying public than Belfast offered if he was to be less dependent on linen design.

The CEMA exhibition followed a 1943/44 exhibition, *Living Irish* Artists, one of the first that the organisation had arranged; of the nineteen artists eight were from Northern Ireland, including Middleton and Luke. The exhibition travelled to Derry, Armagh, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh, and a selection also travelled to Larne. It is interesting that a number of works were shown in Belfast factories and also in the canteen of 'an important linen concern'.[308]

In many ways Colin Middleton's 1945 CEMA exhibition was even more intertwined with John Hewitt than the 1943 show.[309] Hewitt had a particularly personal connection with CEMA as his father had been 'one of the tracklayers' of the organisation and, like his son, had been invited to join the Art Advisory Sub-Committee, but was too ill to do so.[310] CEMA Northern Ireland was a separate organisation from CEMA in Great Britain whose remit, to ensure that the arts maintained their presence and quality throughout the war, did not extend across the sea; it was established with funds provided equally by the Pilgrim Trust and the Northern Irish Ministry of Education.[311]

In 1944 Hewitt had written 'Unfortunately, I can't devote a gallery perpetually to a continuous non-stop Middleton show' but his involvement with CEMA allowed him the opportunity to promote the painter beyond his day job at the Museum. This was a small group of works compared to the 1943 exhibition; Middleton included only twenty-nine paintings, as well as an unlisted group of drawings. This time a small catalogue was produced and John Hewitt wrote a Foreword in which he appears to be slightly ill-at

[308] CEMA Annual Report, 1943/44

[309] As with the BMAG exhibition, it is notable that Middleton was significantly younger and more modernist than either of the two other artists who also held solo exhibitions with CEMA in 1945, William Conor and Paul Nietsche.

[310] *A North Light*, p.156

[311] White, Eric W., *The Arts Council of Great Britain*, David-Poynter Ltd., London, 1975

ease, admitting 'I do not readily speak this tongue; but I am compelled to recognise the sincerity of the artist's utterance'.[312]

His uncertainty might be surprising as these paintings are arguably more accessible and obviously coherent than the 1943 exhibition. Most of them document the physical and emotional geography of his relationship with Kathleen, from Ringneill to Ballyhalbert and back to Belfast. Middleton's symbolism is largely drawn from the natural world around him, from the rhythms of flowers, the sea, daybreak and moonrise. In many ways these paintings are close to the neo-Romantic return to the land that was so important a part of post-war British art.

Clusters of buildings around Ballyhalbert are treated in a stylised, semi-cubist manner, detached in mood and often imagined from the air, suggesting an awareness of Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), whose family in Northern Ireland he knew, that Middleton was to explore more fully in 1945. Rather magical, occasionally mystical mood does not necessarily seem to match Kathleen's recollections of a winter spent living on an 'unlovely piece of headland in the bleakest of landscapes'.[313]

Some other works jar with the gentler mood of this exhibition. Middleton subsequently described *The Birth of David* as 'one of the most pathological canvases I ever produced' at a time when he 'was endeavouring to come to terms with the pathological nature of mysticism'.[314] *Christ Androgyne* stands on its own and remains a complex and often misunderstood work, demonstrating the complexity of Middleton's religious views. It explores the themes of universal suffering and redemption that will become so central to his work later in this decade.

The only painting of Belfast in this exhibition is quite different to those from earlier in the decade. In April 1945, after a difficult winter and three months before they married, Colin and Kathleen moved to Belfast. 89 Rugby Avenue was close to the network of terraces known as the Holy Land built in the 1890s by Sir Robert McConnell and named after places he had visited in Palestine and Egypt. *The 'Holy Lands'* was painted that autumn and its dynamic energy indicates the artist's pleasure at being back in his native

[312] Hewitt, John, Foreword to *Colin Middleton*
[313] Middleton, Kathleen, unpublished memoir, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[314] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 6 March 1950, Private Papers

city. It shares a similar post-cubist aesthetic with the Ballyhalbert paintings, again also strongly recalling Stanley Spencer, but *The 'Holy Lands'* presents a very different experience of Belfast, a vision of urban leisure pursuits that had become a by-product of the industrial city. The long, uniform terraces are curved and elongated with energy, reflecting the competing crowd of footballers and the wind that billows newspaper sheets across the landscape.

The painting offers positive energy and a sense of community, representing many types and ages. The blank newspaper pages flying away perhaps demonstrate a relief from the years when the news of the war would have dominated and affected every life. Ordinary life is taking over again and Middleton has located the freedom and energy of this life within the men and women of Belfast away from their work, with their houses bursting free from the rigid social and economic classification of their lives. The terraced streets are not overshadowed by factories and mills in the distance. In this painting there are only homes. The city has been taken over by the people.

If *The 'Holy Lands'* represented energy unleashed in a manner that is both innocent and revolutionary in a political and Blakeian spirit, it also revealed Middleton as an artist still often turning to the same highly-finished, linear manner of painting that he associated with designing. Perhaps this reflected an increasing demand for paintings that demonstrated this skill, as Tom Nisbet asked in 1945 'Have you any "tight" stuff that I haven't seen? Lots of people are fascinated by that work and I'm sure most of it will sell in time',[315] and even in 1947 Middleton still found this problematic.

When anyone enthuses over my 'smooth' stuff I am distracted and tempted to paint that way when I should be immune and concerned only with getting on with the job of evolving a spontaneous and truly passionate vision.[316]

It is interesting that this painting was completed a couple of months after Colin and Kathleen had attended a Revolutionary Socialist Meeting in the Grand Hotel. William Giddens, Kathleen's father, wrote in his diary of spending the day with the couple, when 'we adjourned to Rugby Avenue again, met Bruce and Betty Barr and in the

[315] Letter from Tom Nisbet to Colin Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[316] Letter from Colin Middleton to John and Roberta Hewitt, 5 and 13 October 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/21

sanctity of the drawing room had a ragged sort of discussion on things Marxian (as alleged) and otherwise.'[317] He also chose to exhibit work with the Northern Ireland branch of the Artists International Association in Belfast in 1945. This had been formed in 1944 as a reaction to the English group established in 1933 in 'response to Soviet policy that the Communist Party should form as many fronts as possible to resist Fascism'.[318]

Colin Middleton's way of life at this period must have become increasingly distant from the accepted norms and morality of his business partner Hugh Page, never mind the managers and owners of the linen businesses of Northern Ireland. It is interesting to note that John Hewitt, married and with a respectable professional position, felt alienated from institutional life in Belfast because of his political beliefs and ultimately struggled to gain promotion; by comparison Middleton could have offended the conservative values of the city in many more ways.

The experimental and challenging nature of his art must have been known to most of them, given the high profile of his recent exhibitions in Belfast. Middleton's political position would have potentially been seen as an active threat, particularly given the economic disputes and uncertainties of the time. The week before they returned to the city, John Hewitt wrote to Patrick Maybin that 'Belfast aircraft workers marched 25,000 strong to waste ground in High Street to demand work…'.[319] Perhaps most disconcerting would have been the news that he was living with a divorced woman and her two children, which was considered a 'scandal' even by John Hewitt. Kathleen Middleton described the problems of their situation and concluded that 'The working classes have not much choice in the matter of morality'.[320]

John Hewitt shared Middleton's utopian socialism and the comparative isolation of Northern Ireland during the war began to shape some of these ideas into a loosely formed theory of regionalism that spread between his various cultural activities. The new familiarity with his homeland that Hewitt gained at this time from travelling across

[317] William Giddens Diary, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[318] *Irish Art and Modernism*, p.151
[319] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 1 April 1945, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[320] Middleton, Kathleen, unpublished manuscript, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

Ulster to visit friends dispersed by the war, to lecture, on holiday, to carry out duties for CEMA, all convinced him of what Riann Coulter describes as 'a collective sense of identity, rooted in the landscape and nourished by a distinctive Ulster identity'.[321] Emma McVeigh described regionalism as not 'state defined or endorsed, but socially and culturally motivated' and defined it as 'characterised by an emphasis on place and locality rather than the concepts of the nation-state'.[322] Arguably, Northern Ireland's very particular and slightly ambiguous situation within the wartime identity of the United Kingdom might have precipitated this heightened local self-awareness.

In 1945 Hewitt wrote in 'Art in Ulster' an analysis of this fragile identity that he believed had formed across the province.

> Ulster is not a nation, yet she has ceased to be a colony, for those of us who are of English or Scots extraction have been here long enough to form a distinct people (together with descendants of earlier immigrations).[323]

Yet he questioned whether there was a specific 'Ulster art', whether there were 'features in colour and design which proves that they were made here and could have been made nowhere else?'

Middleton's position within Hewitt's regionalism is problematic. In his writing on the 1943 exhibition Hewitt does not pick out the Belfast streetscapes for any analysis within this context and in fact most of Hewitt's attention was paid to the symbolist work within this exhibition. It is even more surprising that in his foreword to the 1945 CEMA exhibition Hewitt made no connection between these paintings, most of which made specific references to Ulster places, and the ideas he had expressed in an essay published in *Lagan* that same year. In 'The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer' Hewitt turned to painting as an analogy.

> Never in our history have we had a painter who lived in a country place and made not merely the scenery of it, but the whole tangled bird's nest of its life,

---

[321] Coulter, Riann, 'John Hewitt: Creating a Canon of Ulster Art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 8, December 2013, p.1

[322] McVeigh, Emma, *Regionalism, Modernism and Identity: Sculpture in Northern Ireland 1921-1951*, unpublished PhD thesis, p.15

[323] *Art in Ulster*, 1945, draft held in John Hewitt Archive, Ulster University, Coleraine

> its people their business and behaviour, their garments gestures and architecture, the stuff and substance of his work.[324]

One might have expected these paintings of Ballyhalbert and Ringneill to demonstrate to Hewitt that Middleton could become this artist he described, immersed in the lived experience of a specific place and yet, as he was to go on to demonstrate even more powerfully in Ardglass later that decade, able to make from the elements of it an art of international resonance. Emma McVeigh stresses that 'regionalism actively promotes the local, but not to the exclusion of external or international forces',[325] which could identify this exhibition as an ideal example of Hewitt's theory. But in his foreword to the exhibition he positions Middleton as an artist closer to European modernism than to anything specifically 'local'.

Hewitt was not alone in his awakening of a sense of the shared experience and characteristics of a threatened place and people, writing in 1947 that 'it is to the cultural ripening of our component regions that we, in these islands, must look, if we are to preserve individuality and personality in the face of the world tendency to standardisation and anonymity'.[326] While many artists, writer and musicians in Britain might be accused of nostalgia for a world whose passing had been hastened by the war, for many there was a renewed awareness of the importance of distinctly local characteristics and traditions as a redemptive force within a modernist ethos that had maintained an ambiguous attitude towards war.

Internationalism provided only a limited or short-lived relevance for many artists; the modern style itself ultimately risked emptiness unless it could connect with a more enduring human quality. Rather than imposing himself on his environment, the artist should become aware of, respond to and draw out an essential and unique aspect of his environment. One can see this enthusiasm to explore English identity and tradition in Paul Nash's rallying cry of 'going modern and being British'[327], but for Middleton there was a comparatively slight and insubstantial local tradition on which to base any

---

[324] Hewitt, John, 'The Bitter Gourd: Some Problems of the Ulster Writer', *Lagan*, Belfast, 1945
[325] *Regionalism, Modernism and Identity: Sculpture in Northern Ireland 1921-1951*, p.15
[326] Hewitt, John, 'The Belfast Gallery', *The Studio*, Volume 133, January-June 1947, p.24
[327] Nash, Paul, 'Going Modern and Being British', *Weekend Review*, 12 March 1932, p.322

modernist evolution, particularly when any local identity was contested and uncertain. Arguably Middleton might have aligned himself more closely at this time with his English contemporaries than with other Irish painters. It is interesting to consider whether John Rothenstein, the Director of the Tate, when he had opened Middleton's 1945 exhibition at CEMA and had bought a painting, might have seen connections between Middleton and some of the artists he was to discuss in *Modern British Painters* the following decade, such as Paul Nash, John Piper, Eric Ravilious (1903-1942), Edward Bawden (1903-1989), Thomas Hennell (1903-1945) or David Jones (1895-1974).

Notably *The "Holy Lands"*, which had been included in this exhibition, was acquired at some point by Lord Walston, a major collector of contemporary British art. The address of his wife, Catherine, is written on the reverse of a poem from around this period in the Colin Middleton Archives at NMNI. It seems likely that Rothenstein, a friend of Catherine Walston, might have advised them to acquire the painting, having seen the exhibition, or might have sold them the work he had bought. It certainly suggests that Middleton's work in this period sat comfortably in a British context.

Shortly after this distinctly neo-Romantic strain emerged in Middleton's work he continued to move away from his earlier manner of working, partly influenced by the events of his life at this time, prefiguring the next significant step within his work in two paintings completed in January 1947, *Sardines* and *Lazarus*. John Hewitt appears to have been the first to notice this stylistic development and to see its potential, writing to Middleton later that year that 'I felt from the 'Lazarus' piece that great things were about to happen and I remain safe in that belief.'[328] *Lazarus* was an unusually sardonic work, a fantastical and hallucinatory multi-figure composition reminiscent of James Ensor (1860-1949), one of the Belgian painters who were important to Middleton, that in its expressive weaving-together of a wall of interlocked figures looks forward to paintings of the next decade such as *Isaiah 54* and *Hunter's Moon*. Middleton commented that it might be perceived as 'anti-Catholic' when it was exhibited in Dublin in 1949, although it does not appear to have attracted such comment.

[328] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 4th November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

A similarly high-toned and almost jarring palette is seen in *Sardines*, where the two girls reaching beseechingly towards their bare-breasted mother as she opens a tin of sardines surely reflect daily life in the Middleton household, where Kathleen was now looking after three young children. The physical distortion of the mother's hands and the mask-like faces again look forward to the next decade of Middleton's paintings and both works appear to make a definite effort to move towards a different manner of painting from *The "Holy Lands"*, which had so enthusiastically marked Middleton's return to Belfast two years earlier.

The sense of frustration at his own daily life, as well as anger at the society in which he lived, emerges from both paintings, and perhaps this spurred him towards this attempt to find a technique as a painter that is also less connected with the design skills of his job. Less than two months after completing these paintings, Middleton took the first step in a dramatic decision that he hoped would bring about significant changes in all these areas of his life. Although he realised that he might alienate 'admirers of a particular Middleton phaze (sic)',[329] it must have encouraged him to read John Hewitt's enthusiasm about this new direction in his work.

John Hewitt was arguably the central figure in a crucial period of Colin Middleton's life, yet despite their friendship and all the ideas, tastes and friends they had in common, a picture emerges of two men between whom there was always distance. Hewitt admired Middleton as an artist and referred to him as a genius both privately and publicly. He was able to help Middleton enormously at a time when one senses there would have been few other appropriate outlets for his work. He promoted him alongside these exhibitions in articles and lectures, consistently asserting Middleton's position alongside Luke as the two leading Ulster artists. In many ways Hewitt provided crucial validation for Middleton, as a young man who had not been to university or attended anything beyond part-time classes at Art School and who still held down a full-time job as a damask designer, that he was, intellectually and artistically, the equal of any of his local contemporaries.

[329] Middleton to J and R Hewitt, 5/13 October 1947

Perhaps this emotional and practical distance allowed their relationship to endure across fifty years. Unlike John Middleton Murry and Victor Waddington, Hewitt and Middleton were to remain friends throughout their lives and to work together professionally on occasions until the late 1970s, but undoubtedly in the late 1930s and the 1940s Hewitt was a central figure in Middleton's lengthy and determined journey away from design and towards becoming a full-time painter.

CHAPTER THREE

JOHN MIDDLETON MURRY

3.1

The year that Colin Middleton spent at the community farm owned by the writer and critic John Middleton Murry on the border of Suffolk and Norfolk was arguably the most significant period in his development as a painter. He arrived there with his wife and their three young children in June 1947 and they returned to Belfast in May 1948; amongst the hardships and uncertainty of that period Middleton completed only a handful of paintings, yet it clarified for him the nature of the painter that he wanted to be.

In certain ways the decision to leave Belfast to commit himself to this new way of working and living demonstrates Middleton's closeness to a spirit of the time that was current in many artistic circles of the post-war period. But above all it marks the moment at which the dialectic with which he had always struggled, between designing and painting, reached a crisis point that necessitated a dramatic change in his life.

> …it seems a dickens of a curious upheaval to instigate simply to escape from the linen business…[330]

It appears that he hoped it could become a turning-point in his career as a painter. In November 1948 Middleton wrote in a letter to Victor Waddington, 'some eighteen months ago, I made the first serious effort to break away from cramping conditions, hoping, that with luck, I might eventually come to regard myself primarily as a painter'.[331]

As is often the case with Middleton, there were other aspects to this decision. To John Middleton Murry he wrote, 'We have reached a point in our development when it has become imperative that we adopt a simpler, more functional way of life.' Jane

---

[330] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 7 July 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/12

[331] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 13 November 1948, Private Collection

Middleton recalled that 'it was a new way of life, they decided that they couldn't live in the new consumer society, capitalist society, they wanted to live off the land.' It is interesting that friends of the Middletons from Belfast, Wesley and Marie Lutton, had moved from Belfast to Rubane, near Kircubbin on the Ards Peninsula, to farm and become self-supporting and 'out of the industrial society'.[332]

Certainly Middleton appears to have been out of step with life in Belfast for some time. His socialism set him closer to the working classes, who were experiencing poverty and unemployment in a city whose industrial might was diminishing, than to the professional and managerial classes with whom he would have worked quite closely. As his identity as a painter, as well as his public reputation, became more clearly defined with significant solo exhibitions in Belfast in the mid-1940s, this alienation from the Belfast business world must have increased. His employers and colleagues might also have sensed his artistic interests and his lifestyle increasingly at odds with their own, never mind his political opinions. He wrote of the awareness that both he and Kathleen felt, that their English ancestry set them apart.[333] He appears to have begun to feel that this was making him an outsider in his own country and he clearly felt uncomfortable with the widespread sectarianism that was to affect John Hewitt's career at the Museum.

On a more personal level, Middleton's relationship with Kathleen had caused deep problems with his widowed mother, who disapproved of her status as a divorcée; the two women never appear to have become close in any way and it must have been difficult for Kathleen to compete with Dora's memories of Maye. Their close friend Bruce Barr, Kathleen's first husband, had also returned to England in 1946, with his wife Betty, and had encouraged the Middletons to join them.

By the mid-1940s Middleton seems to have begun to have felt more isolated as an artist within Ulster and more frustrated at the lack of opportunities there. Despite the emergence of the supportive Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, his

[332] Letter from Wesley Lutton to John Hewitt, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/24/1/20
[333] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Middleton Murry, 1 March 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

exhibitions in 1943 and 1945 in Belfast and his 1945 Dublin show had not made the breakthrough in terms of public recognition or commercial success for which Middleton must have hoped. Outside the two academies in Belfast and Dublin and the Irish Exhibition of Living Art (Middleton disliked these large group exhibitions), there were limited opportunities in either city to sell work; at some point he approached the Magee Gallery in Belfast, who were not sympathetic, and there were occasional short-lived ventures in the 1940s such as the MacGaffin Gallery and the Mol Gallery in Belfast and the Lamb Gallery in Portadown, although Middleton does not appear to have become involved with any of these.

Dublin presented more opportunities, with the Dawson Gallery and the Country Shop holding regular exhibitions of contemporary artists, as well as the Harry Street Gallery, but the Victor Waddington Gallery had become widely regarded as the most prestigious of Irish galleries. In the immediate post-war period, Waddington had begun to represent a number of Belfast artists who were all slightly younger than Middleton, such as Daniel O'Neill, Gerard Dillon, George Campbell and Nevill Johnson, yet he had not been convinced by Middleton's work. I will deal with this relationship in the next chapter, but it is important to note that Middleton must have considered that he had exhausted the various options in Ireland that might have facilitated him becoming a full-time painter. England offered access to galleries in London as well as new artistic circles.

3.2

In the Middletons' decision to leave Belfast John Middleton Murry is likely to have been significant for a number of reasons. By 1947 Murry was probably best known as the editor of the Adelphi magazine and as a prominent literary critic, as well as for writing that connected literature with the world around him, producing his own synthesis of Marxism, pacifism and Christianity and advocating the achievement of harmony within traditional rural life.

Lodge Farm at Thelnetham, a village in Suffolk, just across the border with Norfolk, was Murry's second attempt at establishing a rural commune. In 1934 he had founded the Adelphi Centre on a farm in Essex, which was more political in its aspirations but which lasted only a couple of years. In 1942 Murry acquired Lodge Farm with the initial intention of allowing conscientious objectors to live and work there, but his original idealism appears to have been worn down by various problems and disagreements he had with those who joined him, so that by 1947 it was in many ways run along more standard commercial lines, although it appears that its broader reputation as a model for a shared utopian way of life in the post-war world was still intact.

Middleton Murry represented a popular element within cultural thinking in post-war Britain but it seems likely that his appeal to the Middletons was based on two very personal issues. One was the need to find a way to earn enough to survive financially away from the linen industry and without needing to take on further training or a mentally and physically all-consuming job, so that it could became practical for Colin to devote more time to painting and to establish this single professional and creative identity. Shortly after his arrival in England, Middleton himself seemed determined in his ambition to try to establish 'some small reputation as a painter' while managing to survive on sales of pictures as well as 'odd jobs and such food as we can grow and rear ourselves.'[334]

The second possible reason, which is not as clearly expressed within their correspondence, appears to have been Colin and Kathleen's ambition to try to establish themselves within a British literary and artistic world,[335] to which they might have hoped Murry could have provided access. In fact, his influence at this point was arguably waning amongst contemporary writers in England, but Middleton seems to have regarded him as a potential mentor and possible advocate. Although he was best known as a literary critic and editor, Murry had been a friend and early promoter of

[334] Letter from Colin Middleton to John and Roberta Hewitt, 5 October 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/21

[335] It is interesting that Catherine Walston's address is written on the reverse of an unidentified poem in the NMNI archive. Walston's relationship with Graham Greene appears to have begun in Dublin early in 1947.

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and had also been close to members of the Bloomsbury Group, most significantly through his marriage to Katherine Mansfield.

This is indicated in the letter Middleton wrote on the 1st March 1947 to make contact with Murry, in which he also mentions that he has enclosed an article by Kathleen that she wishes to submit for publication. Furthermore, as well as asserting his own local reputation as a painter, Middleton himself included twenty-four sonnets that he had written.[336] At the outset he seems to be positioning himself as a committed and productive future member of Murry's agricultural community and also trying to establish an artistic kinship or sympathy between the three of them.

There was little support amongst Middleton's friends for this decision. In August 1936 John and Roberta Hewitt had travelled to the Adelphi Summer School near Colchester, where they had spent some time with Murry. Hewitt described this as 'about the period when…he was approaching Pacifism; later to box the compass and end up as a Red-baiting Fascist Messiah, the Godhead of his little Communist-dictatorship'.[337] Hewitt records that when the Middletons decided to go to Thelnetham as 'gently as we could we told them what we thought of Murry', but it clearly had little influence and they did not persist.

A more remarkable aspect to this emerges in a letter Bruce Barr wrote to Kathleen just as the Middletons were first in contact with Murry.

> I would like, very, very gently, to remind you that in the winter of 1945 we were the Murry fans, we went to see White in Antrim, not Londonderry, we followed Murry's writing with a greater understanding and we got Murry's position to look like our own. We got permission to go and meet him. Forgive me if I cannot help saying that it was you then who threw the cold water…you who ridiculed 'back to the land (sic), and YOU WHO SUCCEEDED IN CONVINCING ME THAT YOU WERE RIGHT AND CALLING OFF THE NORFOLK EXPEDITION.'[338]

[336] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947
[337] Hewitt, John, (ed. Frank Ferguson and Kathryn White), *A North Light*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2013, 108
[338] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 22 April 1947, Private Collection

This might support the theory that it was not only their espousal of a simpler and more functional way of life working on the land that had led the Middletons to join Murry's community farm, but that they had seen particular professional advantages that they might be able to gain by being there. Coming after a period of immense productivity as a painter, 1946 seems to have been a difficult year creatively for Middleton. He did not have a gallery showing his paintings or an exhibition towards which to work, after three extensive solo shows in the last three years, and there were also the pressures of providing for a wife and three children as well as continuing to look after his widowed mother. In May, Bruce Barr commented that Colin was having 'troubles' while Kathleen was 'going through another sea-change into something inevitably rich and strange'.[339] *Sardines*, completed in January 1947, gives an idea of the domestic claustrophobia with which Middleton was struggling in Belfast, reflecting daily life in the Middleton household, with two young children reaching beseechingly towards their mother as she opens a tin of sardines.

This painting is also notable as it is one of those that points towards the more expressive and painterly style Middleton was to adopt later in the decade. The handful of works dating from the autumn of 1946 are more typical of the invisible brushwork, precise line and smooth surface that was beginning to frustrate Middleton as a manner of painting. *Our Lady of Bikini*, conceived in angry response to the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll, prefigures the distorted and highly emotive apocalyptic visions Middleton was to move towards at the end of the decade and the concept and hallucinatory content of the painting almost seems at odds with the hard-edged detail of its depiction.

Middleton's sense of his work as political protest, of the artist using his voice to raise social awareness or bring about social change, is also clearly expressed here in its iconographical connection to Picasso's 1937 painting *Guernica*, commissioned as a mural for the Spanish Pavilion in the 1937 Universal Exposition in Paris. The two heads that emerge from their distended bodies to the right of Picasso's painting could be seen

[339] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 14 May 1946, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

as a source of inspiration for the detached heads within the sea in Middleton's own protest painting.

One might see another stage of their evolution in Middleton's work in *Siren Over Belfast*, painted two years earlier, with its direct connection to *Guernica* as a painting inspired by the destruction of wartime bombing. But the appearance of similarly interpreted but more playful heads in Middleton's illustrations to Bruce Barr's 1944 volume of poems *There Was A Child*, indicate that it was more than a simple borrowing from an artist he greatly admired, rather an apparent absorption of an image that was used in a very personal manner but without losing its sense of a position of protest taken by artists in relation to such events. As Middleton had written in 1943, 'humanity is faced with the problem of survival' and the artist had to choose what role he would play and to see how he might become 'a vital link in the social chain'.[340]

Our Lady of Bikini is a remarkable painting and John Hewitt considered it, even after thirty years, as one of Middleton's greatest works. He also saw another work from January 1947, *Lazarus*, as offering a promising signal of his future direction, writing at the end of the year, 'I felt from the 'Lazarus' piece that great things were about to happen and I remain safe in that belief.'[341]

Hewitt seems to have continued as a reliable sounding board for Middleton's painting and also, to some extent, his poetry, in the period after his 1945 CEMA exhibition, and it is likely that his role increased after Bruce Barr returned to England in January 1946. One can sense Middleton's increasing frustration at his lack of practical progress as a painter. The Haverty Trust were apparently not interested in acquiring a painting, while the Royal Hibernian Academy were, according to Tom Nisbet, 'unapproachable and one just has to be a good little boy, keep on exhibiting and hope for the best. Naturally being an associate is a joke, there are such a lot of bloody terrible painters in the RHA…'[342]

[340] Colin Middleton, *Note on One Man Show*, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, 1943
[341] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 4 November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[342] Undated letter from Tom Nisbet to Colin Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

3.3

The first suggestion that the Middletons were considering leaving Belfast occurs in a letter from Bruce Barr in the autumn of 1946, suggesting that they could use Middleton Murry as a stepping stone to begin the process of a more permanent move to England.

> It is true that change would be more difficult for you. But it also true that you will have some financial reserve to facilitate a move. I feel that if you can start by getting fixed up through Murry that will cover the transition, just as we made it through Avoncroft.[343]

Barr's antipathy towards Murry was even stronger than Hewitt's, quoting D.H. Lawrence's jibe at Murry: 'You have betrayed everyone and everything so far so why worry about being a bit of a traitor, it is in your nature'. In the spring of 1947 he describes him as 'a drivelling fool not worth arguing with, who has abandoned Communism and turned Adelphi anti-Marxist'[344].

It is clear that nothing was likely to deter the Middletons. The four-page letter Colin wrote on the 1st March received a reply on the 6th, dealing with their request to come to live and work on the farm. Murry acknowledges that he tends to be 'dis- rather than en-couraging' and stresses that co-operative farming is 'a really hard life'.

> There is the difference between the dream and the reality.[345]

In Middleton's vision of this life there certainly seems to have been, despite Murry's warning, something of the 'rural nostalgia' that Stella Tillyard noted in the post-war enthusiasm to live and work on the land, and in which she saw an extension of the 'sentimental yearning for a pre-industrial way of life'[346] at the heart of the Arts and Crafts Movement. There is certainly a nostalgic mythologising in Middleton's

---

[343] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 15 September 1946, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[344] Bruce Barr to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, undated letter Spring 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[345] Letter from John Middleton Murry to Colin and Kathleen Middleton, 6 March 1947, Private Collection

[346] Tillyard, Stella, *The Impact of Modernism – The Visual Arts in Edwardian England*, Routledge, London and New York, 1988, p.16

enthusiasm for 'getting back on the land', where 'direct contact with the soil would certainly satisfy a particular inner craving'; he had lived almost his entire life in Belfast and Kathleen later wrote that 'Perhaps the biggest mistake that I have made in my life is to leave the city and try to become a countrywoman'.

It is notable that at the time of Hewitt's greatest interest in evolving his theory of regionalism, Colin Middleton, whom Hewitt had presented as the leading representative of contemporary Ulster artists, was reclaiming his English ancestry, writing to Middleton Murry about himself and Kathleen that 'although born and reared in Belfast, we are both directly of English parents'.[347] This raises a central issue with Hewitt's concepts of the Ulster identity. Not only is it remarkably fragmented within the counties of Ulster itself, but also immigration, which had taken place on a great scale, in the era of industrial growth, had left many of its inhabitants uncertain of their own heritage.

In Middleton's case, his identity as a designer was rooted in Ulster, so that it is possible he sought something in opposition to this to define his identity as a painter, especially at this point when he was desperate to break away from the linen industry. Having written so much about the attempt to achieve integration within his art and his own personality, perhaps Middleton saw this reclaiming of a much older family identity as an important aspect of this personal quest. Such was the dominance and weight of the legacy his father had left him as a damask designer that Middleton might have deliberately seized on this loyalty to a different family tradition at the point he was determined to move away from design, writing to Middleton Murry that 'land-work' was 'in the blood on both sides but one generation removed'.[348]

There is a much closer alignment to contemporary British artists in this 're-discovery' of the land than we see in any of Middleton's Northern Irish colleagues. The idea of locating a sense of personal and national identity in the landscape, which remained comparatively untouched compared to the bombed cities of Britain, was crucial for a number of British artists and in moving to Suffolk, Middleton was aligning himself,

[347] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947
[348] Ibid.

consciously or not, with a dominant tendency amongst British artists of this time. David Peters Corbett refers to 'a broad category of English art after the war that which shows a renewed interest in rural and non-urban sites, especially those where an 'authentic' or aboriginal Englishness might be thought to reside'.[349]

Hewitt himself had queried in 1945 whether Ulster art was only 'really an offshoot of the English practice'[350] and certainly the group through which he had sought to define 'modern' Ulster art had been shaped by their training in London before they returned to Northern Ireland. Middleton fits within the English modernist dialectic in a way that he does not fit into the Irish avant-garde at this period. For example, *Souvenir: Hastings*, bought by CEMA in 1947 almost a decade after it was painted, seems to acknowledge a British influence both in its title and also in the influence of Edward Wadsworth, who lived in Sussex at this time.[351] Other wartime paintings, such as *The Mermaid Bar* use a modernist idiom that recalls John Piper to treat a subject that suggests an essential Britishness.

The post-war period is a time of rootlessness and Middleton frames this move to England as a reclaiming of his roots, as well as a determined ethical decision to work on the land. But this latter ideal remained close to his sense of himself as a painter. The philosophical decision that the world can only be saved by the conscious communal effort of all people was an ongoing issue that concerned Middleton. He had discussed this in the note to his 1943 Belfast exhibition:

> Today, as never more urgently in the past, humanity is faced with the problem of survival. Survival…is the primary concern of every humanitarian…[352]

This 'need for joint effort', which is to begin through the return to the land, is at the heart of the explanation first given to Middleton Murry as to why they wish to join him.

---

[349] Peters Corbett, David, *The Modernity of English Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, p.156

[350] Hewitt, John, 'Art in Ulster', 1945, draft in John Hewitt Archive, Ulster University, Coleraine

[351] While Nevill Johnson did visit Wadsworth's studio, possibly in the late 1930s, there is no record of Middleton having been in contact with him.

[352] *Note on One Man Exhibition*, 1943

The return to the landscape became, after the war, a return to a specifically rural way of life, rather than just visual tourism. Physical and creative survival were, however, always close for Middleton and it is telling that despite the existence of a number of landscape paintings pre-dating this time in England, it was while he was working on the land in Thelnetham that Middleton felt he had become a landscape painter.

> I feel that whatever comes the immediate contact with crops and soil has been and will be of immense importance… I have tried, several times, to make this landscape conform to a preconceived scheme of painting: it hasn't come off – naturally. I must be patient, the effects that are beginning to work in my system simply defy any form of pencil note-taking.[353]

The mythologising of the English countryside was in part nostalgic, but it also arguably represented a turning-away from the mechanisation and urbanisation that was eroding a specific identity established over generations and replacing it with the anonymous, internationalised role of the city dweller or suburbanite. For Middleton, this might have been partly represented by the banal repetition of out-of-date designs for an increasingly standardised international market. The decision to leave Belfast appears to have been an escape from the creative dead end of damask design that also seems to have had a stultifying effect on his painting. He had written to Murry that in his capacity as a damask designer to the linen trade 'there is no scope whatever for originality.'[354] Middleton also suggested that, while his talents were appreciated in Belfast, not enough was made to keep him there and that the country was becoming 'threadbare' in terms of talent.[355] The physical move to England had forced this break between Middleton and the firms who employed him, while he hoped that farm work would provide enough income to support his family while still leaving him time to paint.

No period in Middleton's life confirmed and analysed the ambiguity of his relationship with damask design as clearly as these months when he was first in Suffolk. The language in which he discusses it offers an insight into his own paternalistic vision of

---

[353] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 22 September 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/19

[354] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947

[355] Draft letter from Colin Middleton to Mr Sloan, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

the industry. In his letter to Murry he refers to 'his father's business as a designer of damask to the Linen Trade'[356] and it is notable that almost fifteen years after Charles Middleton's death he was still referring to this activity in relation to him. Part of Colin Middleton's own identity seems to have been subsumed, in his own mind, into the business of Page and Middleton, in which he was only ever his father's son, even after he became a partner in his father's absence. It is intriguing that only at the very end of 1947 does Middleton imply that the business model set up by his father and Hugh Page is outdated and ineffective and that he wishes to change it.

In an article by Sheila Greene written in 1952 which almost certainly relied on Middleton for its information, he suggests that he became a designer almost by default, because he 'showed talent for drawing – if for little else'.[357] This echoes Murry's recollection that Middleton acknowledged he was 'an artist by choice and training, but he made his living by industrial designing'.[358] Charles Collins Middleton remained a powerful figure within his son's life as the exemplar of a designer who is also an artist.

3.4

The key to understanding Middleton's attitude towards painting and design at this time is most clearly revealed in his letters to John Hewitt, with whom he is likely to have discussed this matter in depth before leaving Belfast. While in England, he wrote to Hewitt that 'Various factors have now made me decide that the thing that I have been stifling all my life is the daily necessity to paint – I just haven't had the necessary confidence in myself to kick over the traces. Kate insists that it is the only way I can come to full possession of myself: I know, in my heart, that this is so.'[359]

[356] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947
[357] Greene, Sheila, draft article on Colin Middleton, 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[358] Middleton Murry, John, Community Farm, Peter Nevill, London, 1952, p.136
[359] Middleton to Hewitt, 5 October 1947

This is a shift from the apparent attempt, within the 1943 exhibition, to find a way in which he can reconcile his identities as a designer and as a painter and come to 'full possession' of himself in this way. He continued to Hewitt, 'I shall paint until I'm forced to stop: by then I trust I will be able to regard myself not as a damask designer who paints at the weekends as a form of relaxation, but as a painter who has to bloody well design damask or hoe sugar beet to keep the wolf at bay.'[360]

Identity is certainly key to this decision. In Middleton's case his sense of personal identity was in crisis at this point as well as his creative identity. The sense of exile that is present in so much British art and literature of this period, reflecting the awareness of time changing and a perceived loss of a particular Eden, often remembered from childhood and mythologised in collective cultural memory, is subverted in an interesting manner in Middleton's case. His own sense of being an outsider in Ulster is clear in 1947.

> Under the surface we are politely held as alien, apart from the fact that we think and behave differently.[361]

Middleton left the drab, blitzed, urban exile (as he then perceived it) of Belfast for a rural paradise in England only to find that it was far from the idyll that he imagined; the exile now became their departure from Ulster, and even decades later Middleton still recalled the hawthorn in full flower on the hedges as they returned on the train from Larne.[362] His Eden was now Ulster rather than the flat and barren Fen country. After about three months in England he writes to John Hewitt, 'I am, after all, an Ulsterman' and complains that the 'bloody English would give you the gripes' and that the 'bastards have never even heard of Northern Ireland'.[363] Only a few months after they have arrived they are planning to return home and Middleton is longing for a glass of Guinness, which will liberate him to paint. A poem apparently written to mark the birth of his daughter Jane in 1950 is firm in its sense of identity.

---

[360] Middleton to Hewitt, 5 October 1947
[361] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[362] Carty, Ciaran, 'He's the Picasso of Irish Painting', *Sunday Independent*, 22 June 1980, p.2
[363] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 22 September 1947, D3838/7/23/19, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI

> I am a man of Ulster, born and reared in County Antrim:
>
> the names still break me – Clady, Glenwherry and Glengormley [364]

The idealism of the Middletons is still clear in the spring of 1947. They appear to receive encouragement from no quarter. Murry gives a realistic appraisal of the work and training involved, as well as the limited accommodation, and suggests they contact Professor Tom Finnegan in Londonderry, who had stayed with Murry, to gain information and for Finnegan to learn more about them, presumably so he can report back to Lodge Farm. Finnegan suggests they meet in Belfast on the 17th April and a letter from Murry arrived at the same time to inform him that the last cottage on the farm estate had now been let. Even Hewitt and Bruce Barr could not dissuade them; Kathleen's father recorded the initial visit in his diary.

> Colin and Kate seem determined to try their luck on the land at Thetford, for Colin intends to go on Friday 9th and interview the almighty Murry, in that historic county town, once honoured by Thomas Paine's birth.[365]

Throughout *Community Farm* Murry presents himself as slightly removed from the disagreements, misunderstandings and character flaws that lead to any dystopian developments amongst members of the community, of which he is the innocent and rather baffled victim. He certainly sets himself in this role in relation to the Middletons, with a clarity and detail in his description of the events surrounding these months that is striking in its deflection away from him of blame or of any confusion or errors of judgement.

Hewitt, however, describes Murry's 'most calculating business sense, that a rundown farm should be turned into a highly efficient undertaking, while the pacifists and earnest goodlifers who broke the stubborn earth and brought it back to fertility by sweat, ache and blisters, should, one by one, be expelled from the presence, until, in the end, Murry had an A1 farm and no pacifists.'[366]

---

[364] Untitled poem by Colin Middleton, NMNI, Colin Middleton Archive
[365] William Giddens Diary, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[366] Hewitt, *A North Light*, 109

There was clearly sympathy between John Middleton Murry and Colin Middleton from the outset of their relationship that, at least on the part of the former, seems to have been left comparatively unshaken by the troubles and disagreements that were to arise. Murry was older, an established and well-connected figure, secure both professionally and financially, whereas the younger man was still seeking to establish himself with any clear footing in the career towards which he aspired. Yet it is possible to trace some similarity in their background and their aspirations that, perhaps subconsciously, made Murry appreciate the difficulty of Middleton's situation. He had himself been a prodigy whose rigorous work to maximise his intellectual talents had brought him into the world he had longed for, but in which he was always conscious of the very different world from which he had come, particularly the constant concerns about money of his early life. This is perhaps telling in his encounter with the Middletons. Murry begins to focus closely on the financial discussions between them almost at the outset of this episode in *Community Farm*. Middleton is clearly not only keen to be there, he also appears to have a rather naïve faith in Murry, convinced that if he commits both himself and his capital to the farm project in an open manner that he believes reflects Murry's own, then their co-operative effort can only work out well. This unquestioning trust will again be placed in Victor Waddington later in the decade and again it will end in rancour amid rather complex circumstances.

By the beginning of June they had moved to England. On the 17th a letter is sent to Mr 'Millington' to confirm the purchase of a house on Fenn Road, Thelnetham and referring to a mortgage, which was arranged privately between the Middletons and Mary Murry.[367] Early in July Middleton wrote to John Hewitt and explained that the house on the farm that they had intended to renovate had turned out to be 'too far gone' and that they had been able to buy Mill Cottage 'thanks to the grace of God and the good hand of Mary Murry' and were now 'set up like the gentry in a delicious cottage'.[368] Mill Cottage had been their home for only three months before they decided to sell it and return to Belfast, although it was only the following May that this

[367] Letter from Jackaman, Smith and Mulley to Colin Middleton ('Mr Millington'), 17 June 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[368] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 7 July 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/12

was accomplished. They clearly had mixed feelings about leaving; Middleton wrote in mid-October, 'we would be very foolish to give up the cottage (plus ¾ acre of land with more apples and plums than we can use).'[369]

This extraordinary turnaround of events was partly due to Middleton' health. In *Community Farm* Murry raises his practical concern about Middleton's fitness for farm work, given his age and his previously 'sedentary life'. These issues were to quickly manifest themselves. The problems with his hands that soon prevented him from working must have been a concern for a man whose manual skill and dexterity had always provided the means to earn a living. He writes 'as the result of Scarlet Fever (of all things to take away as a parting gift from the Emerald Isle!) I developed arthritis, which, having cleared, has left me in serious risk of permanent rheumatism in my hands – if…I continue to use heavy tools.'[370]

The combination of a heatwave and the heavy demolition work on which he had become engaged in July had brought these to a level of seriousness that resulted in Middleton being unable to work or earn money for some weeks. At the same time all three children had been sick. By September he was 'working in the employ of JMM (at scab wages) four days a week; a process of gradual hardening'; he lists the work he has done harvesting, threshing, working with a pick and shovel, making concrete and muckspreading. He writes to John Hewitt that he can see little difference between the 'average factory job (of the conveyor-belt type) and the average farming job.'[371]

Despite this, Middleton had discovered a sense of purpose in the work he was doing on the land: 'I feel that whatever comes the immediate contact with crops and soil has been and will be of immense importance.'[372] The momentous decision to leave Belfast was still, in his mind, clearly leading somewhere, although it appears he was uncertain about his future as an artist.

---

[369] Middleton to Hewitt, 5/13 October 1947
[370] Draft letter to Mr Sloan, undated, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[371] Middleton to Hewitt, 22 September 1947
[372] Middleton to Hewitt, 22 September 1947

> If all this leads to something bigger – well it's worth it. Whether it will be in paint I don't know.[373]

The main reason for their abrupt decision to leave appears to have been a dramatic falling-out between Kathleen Middleton and Mary Murry which took place early in October, apparently at a discussion amongst people connected with the farm. The Middletons often referred to the Murrys' abandonment of their principles as the reason for leaving the farm. Colin even referred to John Middleton Murry as a 'bloody fascist'[374] who had 'come out openly on the side of Mosely (sic)'.[375] Clearly John Hewitt had not been surprised at these events, writing to Patrick Maybin in October that Middleton had 'found Murry out, as he was bound to do'[376] and some time later asserting that 'they had come within his orbit when his mental instability had become a matter for alarm'[377].

To Middleton, Hewitt described Murry as 'the slimiest hypocrite possible'[378], amplifying the criticism of William Giddens but falling short of Bruce Barr's description of him as 'a drivelling fool not worth arguing with, who has abandoned Communism and turned Adelphi anti-Marxist'.[379] Barr quotes D.H. Lawrence's denigration of him, 'You have betrayed everyone and everything so far so why worry about being a bit of a traitor, it is in your nature'[380] and also writes 'If Murry can accept an OBE from the Labour or any other capitalist government he would gladly accept an Order of Lenin – provided they let him publish his books. Only he wouldn't get one, and knows it.'[381] It is perhaps telling that that these three very different men all appear to have disliked Murry so intensely.

---

[373] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 22 September 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/19
[374] Middleton to Hewitt, 5/13 October 1947
[375] Letter from Colin Middleton to Roberta Hewitt, 12 April 1948, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/24/18
[376] Letter from John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 21 October 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12
[377] Hewitt, *A Northern Light*, 129
[378] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 4 November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[379] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, Spring 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[380] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 8 July 1946, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[381] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 5 December 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

It is possible that the practicalities of running the farm and the added complexities of dealing with those who came to live there had sapped Murry's idealism. Middleton's expectations of the farm were framed through the utopianism that defined his socialism and it is interesting to consider Edward Carpenter's comment about small utopian communities:

> I think one reason why all these little communal schemes fail is their narrowness….Personally, I would not like to belong to a community of under a million people! I think with that number one might feel safe, but with less there would be a great danger of being *watched*.[382]

Certainly Middleton was conscious of their increasing isolation at Lodge Farm, but the break with the Murrys arose for very specific reasons. At the heart of this argument appears to be Kathleen's criticism of capitalism and the implication within this that Mary Murry's inheritance from her parents, which allowed her to lend the Middletons the funds for the mortgage on their house, and the interest she charged on this loan, compromised her socialist principles and defined her as a capitalist. Mary Murry replied to a letter of apology from Kathleen and explained that her father's success through hard work and the money she had from him allowed her to work for others without taking a salary, 'to cease to be a parasite', and to enable her husband to use all his capital to support the farm. She also asks, 'Kathleen, is it <u>quite</u> honest for you to run down capitalism so much? Is there any real difference between my inheriting money from my father now he is dead and you…(accepting)…money from Colin's mother…(to buy your house) who is still thriving?'[383] When they decided to sell their house at the end of September Mrs Murry's solicitor informed them that she will accept her loan of £500 back with interest paid up to the end of the month, 'although strictly speaking you should give six months notice to repay mortgage or pay six months interest in lieu of notice.'[384]

---

[382] Carpenter, Edward, 'The Commonweal', 4 May 1889, in W.H.G. Armytage, *Heavens Below*, p.300, quoted in Reed, Christopher, *Bloomsbury Rooms*, p.13

[383] Letter from Mary Murry to Kathleen Middleton, 8 October 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[384] Letter from Burton & Co. to Colin Middleton, 21 September 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

In *Community Farm* Murry writes rather condescendingly of Kathleen who had, he claimed, not only agreed too high a price for the cottage, but had then been helped out by his wife when the Middletons could not afford it. He describes her as 'naïve' and this is perhaps reasonable, but it is clear that the ideology of the Middletons and the spirit in which they approached the communal venture were so idealistic that even the economically rational (and perhaps even generous) conduct of the Murrys was absolutely antithetical to them. He records that Colin himself disagreed with Murry's expectation to receive some interest on the capital that he had put into the farm.

3.5

Despite this drama as well as ongoing health problems and general financial issues, Middleton continued to pursue the ambition of establishing himself as a painter. Central to this effort was John Hewitt. Despite his later assertion that 'I have carefully avoided any traffic in works of art',[385] Hewitt had collected the completed canvases that had been left with Dora Middleton at Chichester Avenue at the end of June and over the summer and autumn he successfully managed to negotiate the sales of around fifteen paintings to a growing band of Middleton admirers, as well as presumably being instrumental in CEMA acquiring *Souvenir: Hastings* for £20 in October. On 11th November Middleton begins a letter, 'Dear John and Ruby (I almost said Dear Theo)', in reference to van Gogh's dealer brother, before suggesting they open a gallery called Hewitt Fils,[386] in reference to Gimpel Fils in London. Roberta Hewitt seems to have pursued the Magee Gallery in Belfast to see whether they might want to sell Middleton's work, despite a disagreement he had previously had with them.

It was from John Hewitt that Victor Waddington's Northern agent who turned out, somewhat to Hewitt's and Middleton's surprise, to be Daniel O'Neill, had collected a

[385] John Hewitt, 'Zoltan Lewinter Frankl', draft of *A North Light*, John Hewitt Archive, Ulster University
[386] Letter from Colin Middleton to John and Roberta Hewitt, 11 November 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/24

dozen paintings for the Dublin dealer's consideration,[387] although not the ones by which Middleton seemed keen to be judged.

> May I point out that I do not regard any of these canvases as among my best work: and that for this reason I consider the prices adequate. I have some 20 or 30 of my best paintings here with me. Would you care to suggest anyone with whom I might make contact in London with a view to the disposal of those and future work?[388]

Waddington had also seen Middleton's paintings at Tom Nisbet's gallery, but there is no record of his opinion of these works at this time. He suggested in July that Middleton contact the Gimpel Gallery in London. In August Middleton wrote to them and Peter Gimpel replied in September to ask if, next time he was in London, he could 'bring half a dozen unframed pictures under your arm?'[389] Despite dismissing Gimpel's interest in a letter to Hewitt, by November he was trying to select six paintings to show him.

Remarkably, given the strain of this period, Middleton began to paint again in the late summer and autumn of 1947, perhaps buoyed by sales in Belfast and Gimpel's interest. Apart from two local landscapes there is a return to the angry political commentary of *Lazarus* in *The Ventriloquist*, as well as *The Promised Land*, which prefigures the dispossessed wandering figures of the expressionist period and which seem inspired by the images that began to emerge from the concentration camps in 1945 and which must have taken some time for Middleton to absorb and to find a way to react to as an artist. Hewitt writes in November that he is 'relieved that you've resumed painting. I felt from the 'Lazarus' piece that great things were about to happen and I remain safe in that belief.'[390] But it was really only at the beginning of 1948 that Middleton seemed to regain his creative focus.

The isolation in Norfolk that Middleton considered so important allowed him to uncover an essential truth about his painting, which was intimately connected with the

---

[387] It is possible that Waddington included some of these paintings in group exhibitions at other galleries in 1947.
[388] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 4 June 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[389] Letter from Peter Gimpel to Colin Middleton, 11 September 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[390] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 4 November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

design work from which he was escaping. In a letter to John Hewitt he broke down his painting into two parts, the 'calligraphic' manner based around drawing that dominated the early work and that demonstrated the skills with which his training and work had imbued him, and the interpretation of this through 'plastic pigment', through which he could evolve 'a spontaneous and truly passionate vision'.[391]

It is interesting to note that Roger Fry, with whose writing Middleton was familiar, said 'of the English painters of the last two hundred years' that 'their art is primarily linear…and non-plastic'[392] While it might be purely coincidental that Middleton's language was so similar, it is interesting to consider whether this might indicate a turning-away from the English cultural world that had been so impenetrable, to align himself with, or to begin to assert, an indigenous Ulster or Irish tradition of painting. He described his satisfaction with the purity of the plastic as opposed to the calligraphic pigment in 1952, expressing his pleasure in a painting where 'pigment…has somehow transferred itself to canvas with the minimum of interference on my part…In that brief excursion it has done no more than organise itself.'[393]

This is also an expression of a new artistic identity that is about to replace an identity that was likely to have been too much bound up with design for Middleton to consider it capable of full expression. He describes the distance he now feels from the paintings of this previous manner: 'some of the old stuff seems quite dead to me now – part of another existence'.[394] Although most of the paintings he completed in the months after this letter do, rather perversely, seem to be excellent examples of his work in a calligraphic manner, *The Ventriloquist* and *The Promised Land* prefigure the expressionist style that Middleton launched into around June 1948 within weeks of settling again in Belfast.

Part of the gestation of this new work can be traced in Middleton's intense and inspirational experience of visiting exhibitions in London that winter. At the Tate

---

[391] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 17 February 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[392] Pevsner, Nikolaus, *The Englishness of English* Art, Penguin, London, 1976, p.134

[393] Unpublished note by Colin Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[394] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 11 November 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/24

Gallery he saw an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Van Gogh that also went on to tour to Birmingham, the Midlands and Glasgow (Middleton suggested 'a loud protest' should be made that it was not travelling to Belfast, 'which must see worthwhile painting from time to time'[395]). Van Gogh was Middleton's 'first 'great love' – the man who opened a new world to me' and it is impossible to read Middleton's description of the 'almost alchemistic transmutation of the original northern palette throughout the fire of Provence'[396] that still excited him without thinking of the transformation of palette and brushwork that will take place in Middleton's work over the next few years.

Although the female figure, the archetype that would absorb Middleton his entire career, was already well established in his work, his ecstatic response to the exhibition of Indian art includes a description of 'red stone dancing girls' whose 'real femininity' Middleton sees as the counterpart to the 'true masculinity' of their makers. The tension between these two natures is central to Middleton's work and is also crucial to an understanding of his vision of the universality of the female form and the implicit presence of the male identity within his work.[397]

Middleton was also powerfully affected by Cézanne's *Card Players* and although he complains about the lack of modern painters who follow in the tradition of the makers of the Indian dancing girls, the artists he lists as important to him clearly reveal some kinship in this reinvigoration of the female form in art; Spencer, Moore, Dali, Epstein, Picasso and Gauguin.

These experiences did not display themselves immediately in his art, although they clearly re-energised Middleton creatively after the difficulties of the autumn. He wrote to Hewitt on the 1st January, 'I'm painting hard again' and then to Roberta 'Since the first day of January I have been working steadily each day'.[398] These canvases are still in the smooth, tightly-painted manner that would have been typical of his pre-

[395] Letter from Colin Middleton to Roberta Hewitt, 19 January 1948, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/24/2
[396] Middleton to R. Hewitt, 19 January 1948
[397] A number of drawings from 1948 demonstrate the influence of these female figures from Indian art.
[398] Letter from Colin Middleton to Roberta Hewitt, 21 January 1948, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive,, PRONI, D3838/7/24/2

Thelnetham work, but there is a sense of a broader vision that Middleton has begun to clarify, searching for the correct word to describe his work and settling on 'Intuitive', while maintaining that 'feeling' was also important. It is possible to see here the roots of the more emotional paintings that were to define the post-war period of Middleton's work, in which van Gogh's influence remains strong.

Of the four paintings completed in January and February 1948, *The Toy Box* has suggestions of the Indian dancing figures that had so engaged Middleton, although its Surrealism might seem retrograde in the light of his recent comments on his own art. *Columbus*, *East Wind* and *Elijah* are equally highly-finished, but in a more ethereal, mystical mood close to William Blake; again they demonstrate Middleton's technical skill and his ease at embodying this symbolist voice, but in their handling of paint they suggest that it was a long period of struggle for Middleton to adopt the technical and stylistic shifts that he had already intellectually embraced. Rather than this demonstrating any ease with which Middleton moved between styles, it actually seems to reveal the difficulties with which these significant changes occurred, the length of time it took before Middleton was comfortable within a new creative persona and the seriousness with which he approached such changes, justifying them intellectually, emotionally and technically before committing to them.

In the catalogue for his first solo exhibition at Belfast Museum and Art Gallery in 1943, Middleton had described the paintings as part of a process of integration and in 1948 this 'Alchemistic approach to the problem of Integration' is something that he is beginning to find in pigment, as Van Gogh did. There is a determination in the constancy of his ambition that also justifies the sacrifices an artist makes, and although he is writing of Van Gogh when he says that 'One would have to be confronted with one's last penny side by side with one's last tube of flake white to fully appreciate the superhuman devotions that went into the making of the last few masterpieces'[399], this could equally refer to Middleton himself both in Suffolk and in the next period of his life.

[399] Middleton to R. Hewitt, 19 January 1948

Middleton must have sensed keenly the risks of this life at this time. While he had moved to escape from the linen industry and to develop an artistic identity entirely separate from his identity as a designer, it was still to his old contacts in this world in Belfast that he turned late in 1947 when it became clear that he could not physically sustain a level of agricultural work necessary for them to stay at Thelnetham. In his deliberations on how best to approach this return, as well as how he envisages the potential of his role as a designer, we are presented with a rare insight into the world of linen design in Northern Ireland in the immediate post-war years.

A letter from a friend in Belfast, Edwyn Kirkby, offers perhaps the most honest appraisal of Middleton's circumstances and suggests that he takes some time to allow his previous employers in the linen industry to believe that he is thriving in England:

> Decide how long (say by sale of paintings or even by advances or commissions, if obtainable) you can completely hide your need of the Ulster linen men. Till then keep them guessing. Men like Jack Hewitt could help to spread rumours not (as I suspect) of your possible return; but of the increasing demand for your paintings and of your growing reputation. Only in proportion as your condition appears to the linen lords to be one of comparative independence will you be in a position to make a dignified and profitable bargain.[400]

Middleton's letters to Hewitt do mention 'a move on the part of sundry Linen magnates to persuade me to return to the fold', before continuing the letter a week later to say that 'I have, yesterday, learned that the Linen Kings have decided to leave me in peace for six months.' He appears confident in the balance of power at this point: 'With the exception of Woods [almost certainly the linen designer R.J. Woods] and Drummond – both well on in years – I am the only technician capable of creative designing.'[401]

But the only known correspondence between Middleton and the representative of a 'Linen King', Mr Sloane, Director of York Street Flax Spinning Co. Ltd., reveals quite a different balance within these negotiations. Middleton had drafted a long letter to

[400] Letter from Ted Kirkby to Colin Middleton, 24 October 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[401] Middleton to Hewitt, 5 October 1947

Sloane, first of all explaining why he did not want to stay in Norfolk, then appearing to fish for a permanent job designing at York Street rather than having to work for a number of different firms, justifying this by saying that he would be able to put his entire effort and focus into working for a single employer. He also implies that there were differences with his father's partner, Hugh Page.

> …being in partnership with a man who was so much my senior, had its handicaps – especially where something really new in the way of designs and woven effects was concerned. Hugh, for all that he was a real good sort, was a continual weight round my shoulders.[402]

It is fascinating to read Middleton's analysis of how he envisages a designer working within the linen industry and this draft letter is the only time he sets forth these ideas. He wants to understand the power looms and the process of weaving more fully, as he believes that the roles of designer and painter of designs should be brought together; only the designer knows how he intends the design should look on fabric and his own work will become more complex, ambitious and effective if he brings together the knowledge of these two aspects of the process.

> The designer neither learns by his own handiwork, nor is there any real incentive to produce new patterns once the most fascinating and therefore stimulating part of the process is carried out by people who have not the capacity to design.[403]

Middleton is perhaps conscious of creating a secure job for himself, but it is equally possible that he believes that without the limitations he describes there is the 'opportunity for serious experimental work'. Certainly his experience as designer and painter would give him unique skills for this role and perhaps he felt that if he could stimulate this discussion amongst those in control of the factories, the lack of ambition of which he complained might be altered.

---

[402] Undated draft letter from Colin Middleton to Mr Sloan, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[403] Middleton to Sloan

The success of the linen industry in Northern Ireland is usually seen in terms of its scale rather than in its use of design in a creative or original manner. When a company did decide to adopt a more innovative approach to this, there does not appear to have been any interest in finding a more collaborative way of working with a local artist or designer to implement long-term changes; rather British designers such as Walter Crane were commissioned to make designs. There is a strange ambiguity to Middleton's position, in that while some of the more successful and progressive linen firms, such as the Old Bleach Linen Company in Randalstown, brought in high-profile figures such as Paul Nash or Marion Dorn to make designs that would identify them with the contemporary alignment of design and art sought at the higher end of the fabrics market, there was no local interest in what Middleton, as both a local experienced designer and avant-garde artist, might have been able to create were he given a broader remit by his employers. The opportunities that could have maintained his background in design, and also used his proven ability as an artist within this work, seem to have tended to find their way outside Ulster, despite the original ambitions of those who had established the Belfast School of Art and its founding intentions that highly-skilled local designers would be able to assist local manufacturers. While the Old Bleach Linen Company represents an increasing sense in the Ulster linen trade that working more closely with artist-designers might become more necessary to maintain their market, rather than merely using designers to copy existing patterns, the plans that Middleton proposed would have had a much more significant and enduring impact on the relationship of industry to contemporary art and design.

It is interesting to consider Middleton's theories as to how linen production could best use the skills of designers alongside Ruskin's vision a century earlier of avoiding the 'inhumanity of machine production and its demoralising effects on the worker'[404]. Ultimately this conception of how one might apply the processes of a small craft workshop to a large, highly mechanised factory was never tested and it was only a few years before natural materials such as linen began to struggle to compete with man-made fabrics and materials.

[404] Larmour, Paul, *The Arts and Crafts in Ireland*, Friar's Bush press, Dublin, 1992, 1

The extent of the hopes that Middleton put into this letter are soon clear. On 6 November Mr Sloane replied in measured and non-committal terms, suggesting in a gentle tone that Middleton should speak to Hugh Page and that in a few years he might be left on his own to work in the way he would like.[405] Middleton's response seems somewhat inappropriate to this mild letter and perhaps reveals the stress he is under. The sheet has been torn and only a part survives, but its meaning is clear.

> Perhaps I was a trifle too optimistic in hoping for a more realistic approach to the problem of designs and designers – for that matter, to art and artists: for it was not only in the industrial field too cramping.[406]

There is a sense of desperation in Middleton's tone as he implies that a number of 'influential people' regard him as a great loss to Northern Ireland. He suggests that it would suit Mr Sloane and also Hugh Page were he to return and work in the same way as before, but that he cannot face 'years of that uninspired drudgery'. He did not make 'a determined effort' to break away from, presumably, the way he was working, 'merely to indulge a whim'. It is an angry letter, even in the partial form in which it survives. Bruce Barr commented on his disappointment, 'I rather feared that the linen magnates would have no sense of Evolution and would expect you to fit into the old grooves'.[407]

Middleton's anger was also directed at those in Belfast who had been talking about his imminent return. Perhaps he considered that this weakened his bargaining position with linen firms, as he complained to Roberta Hewitt (presumably not one of those he blamed) 'Unfortunately those good people who are so sure that I am coming back – I believe a note appeared in the Whig to that effect a short time ago – have put paid to that'[408].

It is unclear whether Middleton took on any design work when he was in Belfast again in the summer of 1948, but in some ways it remained a professional identity, a back-

[405] Letter from Mr Sloan to Colin Middleton, 6 November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[406] Middleton to Sloan
[407] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 5 December 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[408] Letter from Colin Middleton to Roberta Hewitt, 12 April 1948, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/24/18

up plan at moments of great stress, until the moment around 1954 when it became clear that changes within the industry made it unlikely he would find work there again. At this point he turned to teaching, which he had previously described as a 'last ditch'.[409]

In a letter written to Murry on the 26 October to explain the reasons for their departure, Middleton's tone is genuinely touching in its sense of disappointment, admitting that he should not have confided his difficulties to others around him, and saying, 'I realise that I cannot hope for the decision that I have now taken to be regarded in any other light than failure on my part… As you know, I did not come here merely for the sake of doing a different kind of job…I am not happy at Lodge Farm: the more I see of the set-up, the less I like it.'[410]

Murry's letter in return is equally respectful, suggesting that if Middleton had discussed this with him he could have understood his difficulties better and 'might have been able to prevent the false perspective from proving so fixed in you…I think it comes of mental isolation.'[411] In *Community Farm* Murry places most of the blame for these problems on Kathleen.

> I liked the artist well as a human being and perhaps, had he been less under the influence of his wife, something might have grown up between us. Rightly or wrongly, I always felt that the queer ideas were hers rather than his.[412]

Middleton had placed more faith in Murry than was perhaps reasonable, but this powerful commitment to another man prefigures his future business relationship with Victor Waddington. It is unfair to say that the seeds for the disastrous ending of both lay in the idealism with which Middleton approached the relationship, but it certainly explains why he felt so betrayed when each relationship broke down.

---

[409] Middleton to Waddington, 17 February 1953
[410] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Middleton Murry, 26 October 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[411] Letter from John Middleton Murry to Colin Middleton, 28 October 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[412] Murry, John Middleton, *Community Farm*, Peter Nevill, London, 1952, p143

Community Farm was published several years after this episode, in 1952, and it was almost the last book Murry completed before his death in 1957. Despite his prolific literary output, as the author of more than fifty books, Murry's reputation continued to diminish and he is considered a minor figure today despite the large readership and relative significance he enjoyed in the interwar years.

3.6

Late in April 1948 Mill Cottage was sold and on 19 May Colin, Kathleen and their children arrived back in Belfast. Even if his return to his mother's house on 24 May might have seemed like a retreat,[413] Middleton could now get his 'hands on a pint glass of porter again',[414] a precondition for painting that he had described to John Hewitt.

It was, arguably, in the tumultuous year he spent in England that Middleton's sense of himself as an artist became crystallised. It was certainly the point at which he began to see himself as a painter above all else and to consider practical means by which he could achieve this. In addition to the apparent rejection discussed above of any 'Englishness' in his art, there was also a parallel shift in his sense of national identity at the same period. Having noted to Murry his and Kathleen's 'English parents',[415] within months of arriving to England he confided to Hewitt 'perhaps the strangest discovery of all since we came to England: to wit – that I am, after all, an Ulsterman.'[416]

Middleton also places himself in a renewed tradition of Irish painting that might have appealed to Hewitt, whose theories of regionalism had included the art being made in Ulster by those such as Middleton and John Luke.

---

[413] This information and that in previous line from William Giddens diary, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[414] Middleton to Hewitt, 5 October 1947
[415] Middleton to Murry, 1 March 1947
[416] Middleton to Hewitt, 22 September 1947

> The Haverty people [the Haverty Trust purchased paintings by contemporary Irish artists to donate to museums in Ireland, with the object of the encouragement of Irish art] must wait…I'm fed up waiting for them to acquire some authentic Irish paintings…[417]

The slow process of experimentation, consideration and discussion that had been evident in his work since about 1944 and which had so occupied him in Thelnetham, reached a point of fruition in the late summer of 1948. A series of landscapes recorded journeys around Ulster that summer, a rediscovery of his homeland that is expressed in vividly coloured and expressively worked paintings, such as *Dungloe*, painted in July, which Middleton himself described the following year in a note to accompany a print that had been made of it.

> The painter's mood is obviously one of exuberance and excitement evoked by the heaving rough and tumble of his native rock and earth after a year spent in the flat grainlands of East Anglia.[418]

Again Middleton makes a specific emotional connection between the artist and his native landscape; his expression of intrinsic identity as synonymous with place is defined against his exile in another landscape. In parallel with these works were a series of paintings in which the anonymous female figures who had populated the early Belfast street scenes became elevated from passivity to a powerfully transformative acceptance of vulnerability and suffering that created a series of monumental and universal archetypes. This transformation in the scale of Middleton's vision is clear in a comparison of two paintings seven years apart, *If I Were A Blackbird* and *Saturday*, completed in June 1948.

The consistency with which he was to paint for most of the next decade is striking for an artist who is generally considered to have been easily diverted from one style to another. There is a more direct application of pigment to the canvas and brushstrokes are forceful and structured, expressive as much as descriptive. A considered but

---

[417] Middleton to Hewitt, 22 September 1947

[418] Colin Middleton, unpublished note written on 'Dungloe', 1949-1950, Private Collection

effective use of impasto adds to the emotional urgency of the work and evokes a sense of physical immediacy.

These plastic qualities do suggest a 'spontaneous and truly passionate vision' and they have definitively replaced the more precise, linear and highly-finished qualities that are often features of Middleton's paintings of the wartime period. But while the instinctive painter now appears to have replaced the designer, a perceptive reviewer of Middleton's first exhibition with Victor Waddington in 1949 recognised that, in a comparison with the apparently similar technique of Jack Yeats, 'Middleton's pictures were planned from the start and controlled throughout'.[419] It is notable that the process of making a small working study, often 'framed' by a strong border made with the broad side of Middleton's pencil, for his earlier paintings was continued throughout the expressionist period (which is generally considered to have begun in 1948), supporting the theory that these works were more carefully constructed than they might at first appear.

It was these paintings that convinced Waddington of Middleton's potential, possibly because of the perceived connection between his work and that of Yeats, whom Waddington had championed in the last years of the Dublin painter's life. Middleton's professional life was about to be transformed that autumn when he met Victor Waddington.

[419] Patrick W. Hickey, 'Art', The Leader, March 12th 1949

CHAPTER FOUR

VICTOR WADDINGTON

4.1

In the years between 1948 and 1953 Victor Waddington opened up professional possibilities for Colin Middleton that he had never previously been able to consider. Above all, he represented the freedom to paint as he wished and without the constraints of other work. During this time, every painting Middleton completed was sent to Dublin and, in return, Waddington accepted Middleton's artistic vision in its entirety and encouraged him with moral and practical support. He re-iterated in their correspondence that this was a long term commitment on his part.

Middleton's work between 1948 and the late 1950s is set apart from the preceding and subsequent periods in a number of ways and, in part, this is bound up with the nature of his relationship with Waddington. This was the first point in his adult life at which Middleton had not been tied to a full-time job as a damask designer,[420] and the years between 1948 and 1955 were also the only time when he was able to paint full-time until the early 1970s, when he was able to retire from the teaching work to which he had reluctantly turned in 1955.

The dramatic decision to leave Belfast in 1947 to work on a farm in England had not immediately accomplished its central aim of enabling Middleton to leave behind damask design. The mill and factory managers with whom he had made contact again from England later that year, when disillusion with farm work and with his prospects in England had set in, are likely to have provided his main opportunities for work in the summer of 1948, when Colin, Kathleen and their three children returned to Belfast. Even living at his mother Dora's house (she appears to have moved out to south Belfast just before this), Middleton still had a family to support and there is no mention of

[420] With the exception of the twelve months working in England as a farm labourer; during this time he was still at times considering returning to design work.

other work beyond linen design that he had done during these months or that he felt he could do.

The style of painting that is associated with these years had been evolving slowly through the 1940s and I will trace its development to the works completed in the summer of 1948, which first attracted Waddington, as well as its continuation after their falling-out and the gradual evolution into a different manner of painting entirely by 1960. It was a style that Middleton had considered deeply during the year in England and had justified to John Hewitt in language that reveals a deep and multi-faceted consideration of his painting and, specifically of his painting in relation to his training and work as a designer and its place within his creative personality. The painting of this period demonstrates Middleton's elevation of content above technique, in very broad terms, in his vision of art, a mature realisation of how his ideas could most effectively and powerfully be conveyed to a broad audience. There is consistency with many of the ambitions discussed in his 1943 explanation of his work, even with the brief statement he wrote for the Ulster Unit catalogue in 1934; but this is very deliberately the work of a man who had decided to make a practical break from design work and, in addition, to also break from a style of painting in which this was, at least in his own perception, in some way present.

> In 1947 the necessity for a more intrinsic approach to man and landscape culminated in a complete break with his former modes of expression and livelihood.[421]

It also became connected with Middleton's own increasingly defined sense of his identity as an 'Ulsterman'; his desire to be close to 'the good earth' clarified that this was the 'central theme'[422] of painting for him, and the emotional and spiritual power that he found in a series of specific landscapes within Northern Ireland was an undeniably transformative element within his work in the summer of 1948 and in 1949, even though Middleton always asserted that it was while in England that he became a landscape painter.

---

[421] Colin Middleton, unpublished note on 'Dungloe', written in 1949/50, Private Collection
[422] Undated letter from Colin Middleton to Maurice Fridberg, around March 1950, Private Collection

It was perhaps in this defining change of style that Middleton became an artist with whom Victor Waddington suddenly found himself in sympathy. Certainly the artists he chose to represent at this point indicate a preference for a more naïve, looser or more expressive technique. Yeats was then, and remains, the artist with whom Waddington was almost synonymous in his Dublin years, but the artists he was beginning to take on in the mid-1940s often had little formal training and their work was generally intuitive and spontaneous. John Hewitt, in 1944 and apparently before they had come into Waddington's orbit, had already aligned O'Neill, Dillon and George Campbell with the Yeatsian mood that was to become so important in Irish painting, distinguishing it from those who were more technically equipped and expert.

> …in Ireland, as the large reputation of Jack B. Yeats evinces, the blurred, the heavyhanded or the seeming fortuitous are the conventions most admired, and apparently most consistent with some widespread emotional need of our time…[423]

The subtle sense of conflict between Hewitt and Waddington in the late 1940s, or a struggle for control over the selection and presentation of the direction of contemporary art in Ireland, certainly where associated with the North, might also be framed as a shift from one dominant style to another. It is notable that John Luke never found favour with Waddington, who took two of his paintings on consignment in 1947, but did not sell either and apparently never subsequently showed his work. John Hewitt remarked that Waddington 'complained of Jack's prices' and that 'From what I hear he's not pushing them much'[424], but the rigorous technical discipline and the interest in materials that was at the heart of Luke's work was out of step with most of the younger artists he exhibited. Equally the earlier 'calligraphic' style of Middleton's work and the more symbolist paintings that Waddington had seen before the autumn of 1947 seem to have left him comparatively cold.[425] If it was a connection he made

[423] Hewitt, John, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', *Now in Ulster*, Arthur and George Campbell, Belfast, 1944

[424] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 12 September 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[425] This analysis might be somewhat undermined by Waddington's decision in 1946 to take on Nevill Johnson as a gallery artist given the symbolist nature of his painting and the elegant draughtsmanship and highly finished paint surface that owed so much to his friendship with Luke. If Waddington was simply becoming more interested in Northern Irish artists, however, one might have expected him to

between Middleton and the paintings of Jack Yeats that convinced Waddington that he had found another significant artist to take on, any similarity between Yeats and the expressionist manner of painting that Middleton had begun to explore in the mid-1940s, was entirely coincidental; Middleton claimed in 1952 that he had not seen any paintings by Yeats until 1949.[426]

Victor Waddington was born in London in 1906. His significance in an Irish context is largely seen in his representation of Jack B. Yeats from the wartime period onwards and also in gathering together a younger generation of artists from north and south who defined a post-war vision of Irish art that was quite different to the Dublin painters of the 1920s and 1930s who had already initiated a modernist tradition within Ireland. Yet his Dublin gallery first opened in 1926 and for the next fifteen years or so he promoted painters who were firmly aligned with the academic and traditional groups in the Dublin art world. He recalled in 1974 to Harriet Cooke, 'I came back here intending to look at Irish things only and because a lot of what was happening tended to be much more academic I started with a lot more academic things'.[427]

Certainly in the early 1930s his taste appears to have been relatively conservative and populist. He concentrated on solidly representational artists such as Sean Keating, Harry Kernoff and Maurice MacGonigal for around a decade,[428] despite the fact that the city had an active, European-focussed avant-garde in the form of Mainie Jellett, Evie Hone, May Guinness and others. Waddington's first solo exhibition of the paintings of Jack Butler Yeats in 1943 appears to have been a watershed for the dealer, both as a demonstration of the economic potential of showing *avant-garde* art and also in marking a move in his own taste away from these more traditional painters.[429] Dorothy Walker suggests that it was only 'at the urging of Leo Smith',[430] Waddington's assistant, that he had taken him on; perhaps Waddington had less confidence in his judgement

---

have demonstrated some interest in the generation of Basil Blackshaw, T.P. Flanagan, Deborah Brown and Cherith McKinstry, whose work was collected by Zoltan Frankl in the early 1950s, shortly after they left Belfast College of Art.

[426] Sheila Greene, draft article for *Art News and Review*, 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[427] Cooke, Harriet, 'Victor Waddington, The Veteran Art Dealer', *Irish Times*, 26 June 1974

[428] Arnold, Bruce, *Jack Yeats*, Yale University Press, 1998, p.314-15

[429] Riann Coulter, 'The Transmutation of Art into Bread and Butter', in Scott, Yvonne, *Jack B. Yeats: Old and New Departures*, Dublin, 2008, p.121

[430] Walker, Dorothy, *Modern Art in Ireland*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1997, p.31

or a less precise taste than one might assume, which would explain his uncertainty and change of mind regarding Middleton.

It is revealing and perhaps surprising to look at the memories of Dublin artists and characters that Waddington recalled in his 1974 interview. Naturally Yeats was discussed, as was Sean Keating, the first artist he showed, as well as the women artists who had been so dominant in Ireland's first modernist generation, Evie Hone, Mainie Jellett, May Guinness, Harriet Kirkwood, and Sarah Purser, a significant figure from a previous generation. This seems surprising as these are not artists who appear to have had a notable professional relationship with Waddington and in addition there is no mention of many of those who became most closely associated with him. Middleton and the other Ulster artists of the post-war years are not mentioned.

By 1947 the ambitions of the gallery had clearly changed from its conventional beginnings. David Sears wrote that Victor Waddington's new gallery 'compared favourably in size, and in the facilities offered, with any of the famous commercial art galleries in London, Paris or New York'[431] and that its construction is 'a logical, almost an inevitable development' of the gallery's policy, which aimed 'to awaken national interest in the work of our artists' as well as 'to bring to Dublin the work of the best and most interesting artists of other countries'.

One of Waddington's most significant achievements was in the audience for art throughout Ireland that he had built up with such determination. Over two decades this had risen from about 250-300 visitors to each exhibition up to 1,600-1,700 and David Sears wrote of these that 'the work of our most popular artists will be seen by some three thousand people in the ten days.'[432] Even the exhibitions that Waddington organised in other cities such as Galway, Limerick and Cork, having seen evidence of interest in contemporary art there, often brought in more than a thousand people.

His agreement with Yeats appears to have acted as the template for Waddington's future contracts with young artists and perhaps the 1943 exhibition, as well as the

[431] Sears, David, 'The First Twenty-One Years', *The School of London*, Victor Waddington Galleries, Dublin, March-April 1947
[432] Ibid.

publicity for the first Irish Exhibition of Living Art that same year, persuaded Waddington that there was an audience and a market in Dublin for more avant-garde contemporary art. Perhaps it was also around this time that he began to see the possibilities for promoting Irish artists in an international context.

4.2

The Irish Exhibition of Living Art emerged from criticism of the Royal Hibernian Academy and, more particularly, the rejection of two paintings by Louis le Brocquy in 1942 (ironically the IELA themselves appear to have rejected Middleton's *Isaiah 54* in 1950). In the same year Mainie Jellett wrote an article that listed the 'bad craftsmanship, vulgarity and faulty weak draughtsmanship' that were the 'main characteristics'[433] of the RHA exhibition, providing an interesting parallel to John Hewitt's criticism of the Ulster Academy of Arts in the early 1930s.[434]

Despite the fact that the first committee of the IELA were all Dublin-based (although James Sleator and Margaret Clarke were both born in Ulster), it soon became a focal point for the Ulster artists gathered around Waddington, and perhaps even a marketing tool that he used to position his 'stable' at the heart of contemporary Irish art. Brian O'Doherty noted the mutual benefits.

> Victor Waddington's gallery in South Anne Street augmented the effect of the Living Art, gave focus to the local scene and assembled the first stable of Irish artists…[435]

[433] Mainie Jellett, 'The RHA and Youth', *Commentary*, May 1942, p.5 and 7, quoted in S.B. Kennedy, *Irish Art and Modernism*

[434] Noelle Johnson's 'Salon des Indépendants' also appears to have been inspired by a disagreement of some kind between the UAA and a number of the artists who exhibited with her.

[435] O'Doherty, Brian, 'The Irish Imagination' (1971), Cullen, Fintan (ed.), *Sources in Irish Art – A Reader*, Cork University press, Cork, 2000, p.269

Gerard Dillon showed in the inaugural 1943 exhibition, Daniel O'Neill the next year, Middleton in 1945 (before he was represented by Waddington), George Campbell in 1947 and Nevill Johnson in 1948 but, according to Brian Kennedy, they 'dominated the later Living Art exhibitions' and added to the image Waddington presented of a coherent group of mostly Northern painters who 'determined the development of Irish painting throughout the 1950s'.[436] Certainly the IELA demonstrated a public and critical interest in more advanced contemporary art and provided a reassuring context for collectors.

It is unclear whether Waddington's interest in these Ulster painters who were be at the core of the modernist group that he showed in the mid-1950s had grown gradually, or whether it formed part of a deliberate policy to engage with a new group of artists, and even, perhaps, with a new audience. It is interesting that one of Waddington's most active clients in the second part of the 1940s, Zoltan Frankl, was based in Belfast and by 1944 already owned works by Sean Keating, Nathaniel Hone and Jack Yeats, possibly purchased from Waddington; this was a couple of years before he showed any of the Northern quintet of Dillon, O'Neill, Johnson, Campbell and Middleton.[437] Perhaps it was Frankl's enthusiasm for their work or Waddington's hopes to uncover more clients in Belfast through exhibiting more Northern Irish artists that encouraged him; Frankl was an important figure within Irish art and collected extensively and with remarkable prescience, despite the fact that he was renowned for his hard bargaining.

In many ways, aside from his relationship with Yeats, this group were arguably to define Waddington's contribution to Irish art. Daniel O'Neill was the one of these five with whom Waddington was to have the most enduring professional connection and by 1947 he was even acting as Waddington's agent in Belfast. O'Neill was an electrician by trade, typifying the background of this generation of predominantly self-taught painters who emerged from Belfast in the early 1940s[438] and his inspiration was largely

[436] Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism*, Irish Academic Press, Queen's University, Belfast, 1991, p.130

[437] Adams, Mark, 'A Northern Maecenas', *Irish Arts Review*, Dublin, Autumn 2003, p.100

[438] Many artists from working class or lower middle class backgrounds were able to attend classes at Belfast College of Art due to its evening and Saturday classes, as well as the scholarships which enabled full-time study for the most able, including John Luke. Scholarships also enabled many to continue their studies in London. For many of these, art training was perceived as an advantage in industrial

drawn from early twentieth century European art, rather than from any of his Irish predecessors.

Waddington first exhibited O'Neill's work in 1946, having bought paintings from him in 1945. Within this period he appears to have taken on O'Neill's friends Gerard Dillon and George Campbell and also Nevill Johnson, an English painter who had moved to Belfast in 1934. Johnson recalled the various stages of their involvement, from his first visit there with a group of paintings which the dealer offered to buy outright, before in 1946 'offering a retainer, a regular allowance'.[439] He also recalled Waddington's encouragement and support, providing reassurance as well as 'lunch, brandy, money, warmth and flattery'.[440] Waddington began to present these four as a group and as a new, exciting generation to follow in the footsteps of his gallery's, and Ireland's, leading living painter, Jack Butler Yeats.

It was only on the insistence of Kathleen Middleton that Colin had contacted Waddington again soon after their return to Belfast, at a point when he was attempting to position himself once again as a designer, thus setting in motion events that, entirely unexpectedly, led to him achieving freedom from the linen industry and freedom to paint. Her influence had already been demonstrated in the couple's uneasy relationships with Dora Middleton and with John and Mary Murry. Kathleen was certainly not as close as her husband to John Hewitt, who might have influenced him against the Dublin dealer.

Hewitt does not appear to have admired Waddington and while a number of reasons may have contributed to his feelings, it is possible that he might have seen the Dublin dealer's interest in these Belfast painters as encroaching on his own well-defined territory. Hewitt had become a friend and in some ways a self-appointed intellectual guide for artists such as Luke and Middleton, in particular, sharing books, keeping up to date with contemporary British and European art and art theory, and placing them

---

design or as a qualification to teach art. It was unusual for artists without financial independence to carry on careers as professional exhibiting artists, so that the group Waddington exhibited in the 1940s demonstrated more progress in social mobility from the preceding generation.

[439] Johnson, Nevill, 'The Other Side of Six', in *Nevill Johnson: Artist, Writer, Photographer* (Eoin O'Brien, ed.), The Lilliput Press, 2014, p.55

[440] Ibid., p.53

within the evolving identity of his Ulster cultural canon. Perhaps there was also some sense of competition over the unofficial position of adviser to Zoltan Frankl, with whom both Hewitt and Waddington were on friendly terms.

Hewitt was in a uniquely strong position to provide practical assistance in Belfast, arranging exhibitions with the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, where he was a curator, and the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, with which he had been involved from its inception. He had facilitated purchases, such as Middleton's *Lagan: Annadale, October, 1941* and commissions such as *The Rehearsal* from John Luke in the late 1940s, as well as writing essays and giving lectures throughout Ulster. Hewitt clearly enjoyed the role he could perform and the assistance he could provide, suggesting to Patrick Maybin that he had influenced the Museum's acquisition of the Middleton painting in 1943. It is interesting that when Middleton and Waddington were discussing the retrospective exhibition scheduled to be held in Belfast's Municipal Gallery at Stranmillis for 1954, the former was conscious of not bypassing Hewitt, suggesting the sensitivity of his position between artist and dealer, and asks 'would it be more diplomatic to leave dates to Mr Hewitt'?[441]

Hewitt might have been concerned that Waddington threatened to remove these artists from his sphere of influence and to make his sense of a shared local identity less relevant and it is interesting that he is rarely mentioned in Middleton's correspondence from 1949 onwards. When they are considering who might write an introduction for Middleton's first solo exhibition in 1949 Middleton suggests his friend Bruce Barr; Waddington appears to have recommended Noelle Johnson, Nevill's first wife. There is no mention of Hewitt, who might have been considered the most obvious, appropriate and prestigious candidate.

Hewitt was only three years older than Middleton, but he had been the first of a series of important male figures that came into his life after the death of his father in 1933. The key to each of them, perhaps, is the validation they gave, or could have given him as a painter. Middleton Murry was the second, and Middleton's sense of anger and

[441] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 28 October 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

betrayal towards him was, arguably, comparable, to that he felt again when Waddington, in Middleton's eyes, let him down. Waddington's response to Middleton's work was more instinctive than Hewitt's, who was more capable of rationalising his response to his friend's painting within an international contemporary context, and the dealer offered Middleton the financial commitment of allowing him to paint full time and the ability to bring his work to an international audience.

In 1947 Middleton still had serious reservations about the art market. As well as his comments to Murry about the 'gross artificiality of the contemporary art world',[442] to Hewitt he wrote 'with the exception of Tom Nisbet, picture dealers give me the willies. I don't like their methods.'[443] He indicated at this time that he considered it important for a Belfast artist to show locally, rather than giving in to 'the centralisation of major picture dealing'.[444] The many contradictions of Middleton's statements of this period do indicate a sense of confusion or perhaps are intended to play down the difficulty he had found in being taken on by a suitable gallery, but there is also a sense that his attitude is changing and that he realises now that it is crucial for him to sell paintings. As a result, there is a new practicality in his outlook in the second half of 1947.

Middleton made no effort to hide that his interest lay in exhibiting in London above Dublin or Belfast. This ambition aligned him closely with Waddington's own ambitions. In 1947 Waddington had already expressed an interest to Hewitt in June in having fifteen or twenty Middleton canvases for overseas buyers;[445] he had already organised touring exhibitions of Irish artists and within a couple of years he and Middleton were discussing his plans for a gallery in London. In the same letter in which Hewitt noted Waddington's interest, he also passed on news from Tom Nisbet that Waddington had called round to the Grafton Gallery but that he 'was scared off at prices'. At this time Middleton's prices might have seemed quite high in comparison to those of his contemporaries. It is difficult to find precise comparisons, but in the 1945 Irish

[442] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Middleton Murry, 1 March 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[443] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 5-13 October 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/23
[444] Middleton to Hewitt, 5-13 October 1947
[445] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 30 June 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

Exhibition of Living Art, Middleton's two paintings (*The Dark Tower* and *The Mirror*) were priced at £100 and £65 respectively, while paintings by George Campbell, Gerard Dillon and Daniel O'Neill shown at the IELA in the mid-1940s were mostly priced between £15 and £25. Once they began to show at the Waddington Galleries their prices seem to have risen significantly, whereas Middleton's perhaps had little room for increase.

As well as his concern over prices, it is also possible that Waddington found the precise, surrealist or symbolist style of most of the works Middleton showed at Nisbet's Grafton Gallery, alongside a number of atmospheric and slightly naïve Belfast street scenes, not quite to his taste. If he was attempting to put together a group of painters to define contemporary Irish painting which could then be promoted further afield it would have been difficult to place Middleton within this group, although this argument might be countered by Waddington's decision to represent Nevill Johnson, a painter whose work challenged the idea of a specifically 'Irish' art.

A letter from Waddington to Middleton in the middle of July 1947 indicates that he intended to show Middleton's work to Maurice Collis, the art critic of the *Sunday Observer*, who was around that time writing an introduction to Waddington's 'School of London' exhibition; further, he adds that he wants to organise an exhibition of 'new things' in Dublin for the next year. The reason why this never occurred or why there appears to have been no further correspondence at this time is never explained. Instead, in the middle of August the paintings were returned by Waddington to Tom Nisbet 'without comment' and Nisbet asks 'Did anything come out of the Waddington activity?'[446]

Throughout this time John Hewitt still seemed to be acting unofficially on Middleton's behalf in Belfast, selling work and receiving payment, placing Middleton's work in exhibitions, on one occasion apparently even signing a painting for the artist. In Middleton's extensive correspondence with family and friends in Belfast and England in these months (apart from with Hewitt) there is no mention of Waddington as a

[446] Letter from Tom Nisbet to Colin Middleton, 18 August 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

possible outlet for his paintings or the possibility of any assistance being offered by Waddington to allow Middleton to continue to paint after the disappointment of Thelnetham. His hopes in that direction appear to have been stifled and the decision to return to Belfast appears to have been motivated by the fact it might allow him to find design work and be able to conserve his health and energy for painting at the weekend, although his proposed return to the linen industry was not received with the grace and flexibility that he had hoped for from the managers of various factories.

4.3

Until the end of May, when their house had been sold and Middleton was living back in Belfast at his mother's house, there were no further paintings; then in June began a steady outpouring of work. We can perhaps see an element of the gestation of these pictures in *The Ventriloquist* or *The Promised Land*, both painted in England in the middle of the previous year, but the consistency and confidence of the works of the second half of 1948 does seem, in many ways, to have sprung from nowhere (although the impact of a Van Gogh exhibition that Middleton saw at the Tate in January 1948 and an exhibition of Indian art at the Royal Academy at the same time should not be underestimated). It is likely to have been photographs of these paintings, completed at a time of vulnerability and self-doubt, as well as those from the year in England, that Middleton sent to Waddington around the end of August 1948. He might also have included three substantial canvases completed since his return, *Saturday*, *Dungloe* and *Teresa*. These three paintings prefigured the technique, mood and subject matter of the work Middleton was to make during his years under contract to Waddington.

According to Jane Middleton it was only because of her mother's persistence that Waddington was approached again. These photographs do not appear to have drawn a quick response and Middleton wrote to Waddington to ask for their return, also asking, 'Is there any likelihood of you being in Belfast in the near future as I should like

some reputable dealer to see my work in bulk?'[447] This does indicate the isolation of which Middleton must have grown conscious since his return. Hewitt could only help him so far and the Magee Gallery does not seem to have expressed much interest, while the Grafton Gallery in Dublin, despite Nisbet's personal admiration, had sold only a handful of his paintings.

By late October Waddington had still not replied and Middleton wrote again, enclosing a postal order and asking for the return of his photographs. Two days later, on 27 October, Waddington replied. In a strikingly frank letter, he says that he admires these new paintings and will come to Belfast to see them and to make arrangements to act as Middleton's agent. It is a remarkable turnaround, based on the previous correspondence between the two men.

Waddington's interest in Middleton has almost always been placed within the context of the 'Northern School' of painters whom he represented in the late 1940s. Yet not only was Middleton quite separate as a man and an artist from most of this group, his work also appears to have been rejected by Waddington in 1947 at a stage when he was already acting as an agent for many of them. It is possible, as explored above, that Waddington responded more strongly to the expressionist paintings Middleton showed him now, or that they suggested to him a kinship with Yeats, or simply that Waddington's own understanding and appreciation of contemporary art had continued to develop, but it is also interesting to consider the deep personal connection between the two men that came so quickly to the fore once they had actually met. Perhaps in Middleton's recent work Waddington found a powerful and unexpected emotional bond. Riann Coulter suggests that Waddington's Jewish heritage positioned him as an outsider within Irish culture and allowed him to 'challenge conservative conceptions of Irish art and embrace the international. Excluded from the narrow conception of Irishness that dominated mainstream culture, Waddington was able to act as a mediator between Irish and international art.'[448]

[447] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 17 September 1948, Private Collection
[448] 'The Transmutation of Art into Bread and Butter', p.121

There is an interesting application of this theory to Middleton. While he does not appear to have had Jewish ancestry Middleton clearly had a great interest in the Israel of the Bible and also responded deeply and emotionally to the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust. While the role played by Waddington during the war is undocumented, various sources attest to his courageous commitment to helping Jews escape from Nazi-occupied territory.[449] Middleton presented the horrors of the war and the holocaust in terms that often derived from the Bible and placed them in the context of the history of the Israelites. It is possible that Waddington not only empathised with these paintings because of his own identity and his wartime experiences, but also saw Middleton as an Irish artist who transcended the local tradition and whose work could have a truly international resonance.

This compassion is something that is often associated with Jack Yeats' later works and it does appear that Waddington might have seen Middleton as the painter who would continue the role that Yeats had played for him, but amongst a younger generation. The idea for the contracted relationship that Waddington had first employed in his workings with Yeats was continued with these younger Belfast artists, a generous and potentially risky strategy as they were still relatively unknown by comparison with the elderly Yeats, whose 1943 solo exhibition had been such a success for the Dublin dealer.

Waddington must have come to Belfast early in November and presumably saw Middleton's paintings in the shed in which Middleton still painted at the back of the family home at Chichester Avenue. A letter he wrote from Dublin on 12th November confirmed the details of their contract and set out the prices that Middleton would receive for different scales and subjects of paintings (figure paintings are priced higher than landscapes of the same scale). As with his other young painters, Middleton was to receive a regular salary of £40 per month from Waddington as an advance against sales. By the early 1950s this had risen to £80, although the rise was largely disproportionate to any increase in the prices for his work.

[449] *Jack Yeats*, p.318

The tone of Middleton's reply mirrors in some ways the commitment he made to John Middleton Murry before they had even met and it begins to place Waddington in the line of these significant male figures in Middleton's life who followed on from his father, the original archetype of adviser and guide and, crucially, also a painter and a designer. Neither Charles Collins Middleton, nor John Middleton Murry, or even John Hewitt, could resolve for him the connected but ultimately dialectical roles of designer and artist, but with one letter Waddington appears to have done this by providing him with the practical means to become a professional painter. With it he gains Middleton's complete commitment.

> As you know, some eighteen months ago, I made the first serious effort to break away from cramping conditions, hoping, that with luck, I might eventually come to regard myself primarily as a painter. That you have made this final step possible is something which will take me some little time to get used to. I know myself well enough to know that there will be a transitional period of reorientation: but I have sufficient confidence in myself to know that, if we are patient, the work ultimately produced will be the surest appreciation I can offer you in return for your confidence.[450]

Even when it seemed that the relationship of painter and dealer was on the rocks and unlikely to last much longer, the importance of this was noted by Bruce Barr.

> What I do think is always to be thankful for is that the painting was able to be everything for at least a crucial spell of years.[451]

There are two immediately striking aspects to the relationship between Waddington and Middleton. The first is the close friendship they developed, a friendship that seems to have surpassed all others in Middleton's life at that time and which certainly seems to have been reciprocated. In 1950, the year after he had first exhibited Middleton's work, Waddington wrote to the Belfast painter, 'I did not need your last letter to tell me that you felt the bond that was between us, but I was glad to have it and I thank

[450] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 13 November 1948, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[451] Letter from Bruce Barr to Colin Middleton, 3 February 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

you for it.'[452] A year later, Middleton responded to Waddington's encouragement by writing, 'Which of us is instrumental in the production of our paintings, no one can say. And where you start and I stop – even our respective women couldn't tell us that'.[453] On the reverse of a 1949 painting, *The Power and the Glory*, Middleton inscribed 'To Victor who made it possible'. The tone of this correspondence is very different to the letters Middleton had written to John Hewitt while he was in England. These are chatty, bringing Hewitt up to date with news from Thelnetham and the latest gossip about Murry, as well as discussing business and, most significantly, recording the process and planning behind the evolution in Middleton's painting. They often express gratitude, but with Waddington there is a remarkable emotional openness. He and Middleton rarely discuss the process or meaning of any new work and the letters are often practical in content, discussing sales, finances, shipping, travel, promotion and the supply of materials. But in their tone there is an absolute trust and commitment. Waddington does not need to be convinced of the seriousness of Middleton's work and is open in his praise and commitment; they seem, for several years, to have been absolutely at one in their shared ambitions and their vision of shared triumphs to come.

Any reference to Hewitt is almost entirely absent from their correspondence. We know Waddington and Hewitt met in 1952 when the former came to Belfast to discuss the Museum holding an exhibition by Daniel O'Neill, and that Zoltan Frankl took them both to lunch.[454] It seems unlikely that Waddington's closeness with one of the artists who had most represented the poet's attempt to express an Ulster identity (and one of the two painters whose reputations he had certainly assisted in building) would have helped the two men to overcome any antipathy that Hewitt had held.

The other notable aspect of this relationship is the intense belief that Waddington had in Middleton's work and his determination that he would bring him the recognition he believed the painter deserved. They both seem to have considered themselves as a team embarked on a long term strategy. Waddington appears to have shared with

[452] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, probably March 1950, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[453] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 12 February 1951, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[454] Hewitt, John, 'Northman', February 1952, p.87

Middleton around 1949 or 1950 his plan to have a gallery in London, where he could show his work, although it is unclear who else he planned to take there as this idea appears to have remained generally secret until the mid-1950s. Any short-term financial hardship they were both going through would be worthwhile if it enabled this London gallery to come into being. Waddington's respect for Middleton as a painter was such that it does not seem unlikely that he might only have discussed the move to London with him. He differentiates him from the other artists he shows, so that when Middleton is concerned about being in a 'stagnant period' Waddington writes, 'you cannot, being the painter that you are, just go on producing at a steady level. That is for the others.'[455] There is a constant talk of their unity as a team and they each have a striking confidence in the goodwill of the other.

> …do not worry about your end of the bargain or about mine…ours is a long term policy which concerns you and I equally, and I am ready to back the final outcome.[456]

Waddington's interest in selling Irish art internationally had been active long before he was representing Colin Middleton, but Middleton appears to be the first of his artists for whom this is also crucially important. Their entire relationship was built on the long term ambition that any practical difficulties in the short term could be borne if they contributed towards the goal of building awareness, recognition and sales in Britain, Europe and America.

In 1939 Waddington organised a touring exhibition of Irish art for the United States that included a number of largely conservative or academic artists such as William Conor, Sean Keating and Maurice Wilks.[457] While the selection gave no indication of the focus on a more dynamic, internationalist Irish modernism that was to dominate his later attempts to secure an international market, it demonstrates his remarkable energy and ambition. In May 1951 he wrote to Middleton from Chicago, listing the cities he was visiting on his trip to America, 'a market (at Museum level alone) which is

[455] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 8 February 1951, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[456] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 6 March 1951, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[457] 'The Transmutation of Art into Bread and Butter', 129

going to be of vital importance to us'.[458] Having travelled between San Francisco, Los Angeles, Dallas, Houston, St.Louis, New York and Boston before reaching Chicago, Waddington was still to visit Detroit, Toledo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Washington before returning to New York.

The decision taken by the Irish state at the outbreak of war to remain neutral throughout the conflict,[459] arguably proved beneficial to galleries such as Waddington's. Without the threat of urban bombing, the turning-over of factories to war work or the absence to the army of large numbers of men of working age, Dublin did not face the hardships of Belfast, and the difficulties of travelling even in the years immediately after the war ensured that local collectors relied on galleries in Dublin. Once the city began to enter a harsher period of post-war austerity, Waddington appears to have realised that it was necessary for him to find other outlets for his artists, first in London, where he came to arrangements with the Tooth Gallery and Heal's Department Store to show their work, then in a number of cities across the United States and also in Holland and Sweden. The confidence of these years of a rather strange and precarious boom still appears to have been in place, however, when Waddington began to focus on this group of younger artists.

4.4

It was decided that Middleton's first solo exhibition with Waddington was to be a retrospective of paintings from 1942-1949. In informing Waddington that he has put together forty canvases for the exhibition, Middleton also says that there are ten more paintings, 'of dubious vintage', that have been with either Tom Nisbet or Waddington before. Again, this raises the question of why Waddington suddenly became such a

[458] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 13 May 1951, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[459] Despite this neutrality, many Irish citizens served in the British armed forces

fervent admirer of Middleton's work when he had previously had reservations about works that he had not wanted to exhibit only two years earlier.

The diverse range of works across these years was noted by most reviewers. The critic of the Irish Times admired with reservations the earlier works, typified by 'vivid colour, a fine decorative feeling, and a certainty of draughtsmanship',[460] but found in the more recent paintings 'a style harsher and cruder in some respects, but infinitely stronger, and capable of a much wider range of emotional possibilities'. Patrick Hickey in 'The Leader' noted that 'the paint is put on in a most precise and careful manner' and judged that 'as purely decorative pieces, they are most effective'.[461] Another writer described the work shown at the Grafton Gallery in 1945 as 'smooth, polished pictures' and contrasted these with his 'mature paintings'.[462]

It is intriguing to note in these reviews a descriptive alignment, perhaps unconscious, between Middleton's earlier work and typical hallmarks of design. Words such as decorative, precise, smooth, or the phrase 'certainty of draughtsmanship' could almost be descriptions of the professional skills Middleton had acquired in the previous twenty years. But the critics appear not to see his recent work as an abandonment of these qualities, merely a more effective use of them.

> …while one might quarrel with the distortions, one cannot doubt the ability of the artist as a craftsman: his colour is always pure and fresh, his brushwork is always clean and deliberate. There is not the slightest doubt that he knows what he is trying to do…[463]

Patrick Hickey sees in Middleton's pictorial discipline his advantage even over Yeats and provides a remarkably insightful comparison of the two painters.

> Yeats probably had little influence on Middleton, but it happens that they are working on roughly similar lines. Middleton has all the colour sense of Yeats, but where he excels is in his ordering of this colour. In Yeats there are many

[460] *Irish Times*, 25th February 1949, p.3
[461] Hickey, Patrick, *The Leader*, March 12th 1949, p.9
[462] Irishman's Diary, *Irish Times*, 4 March 1949, p.5
[463] *Irish Times*, 25 February 1949

> unco-ordinated elements which spoil his pictures…but Middleton's pictures were planned from the start and controlled throughout.[464]

This new style is the continued ambition expressed to John Hewitt in 1947, to 'trap something of the plastic quality that so far has eluded me for the most part',[465] but it is striking that these writers were so conscious of the level of control that remained as a legacy from his earlier manner of working. Draughtsmanship was a central quality of those works and Middleton was happy to include drawings in the major solo exhibitions that he held except for those during the years in which he was working with Waddington. It is significant that drawing remained crucial to him even while painting in an expressionist manner that by its nature suggests directness and spontaneity as central qualities.

A canvas survives from the unused and unfinished canvases that Middleton sold to Nevill Johnson before he left for England in 1947, on which there is little more than the outline of a multi-figure composition comparable to works of 1950 and 1951 such as *Isaiah 54* but which, intriguingly, seems to date from three or four years earlier.[466] Not only does this demonstrate Middleton's remaining dependence on drawing and planning even when painting in an expressionist manner, it also suggests the slow evolution of these changes in his work and makes it clear that such development was far from being a whimsical journey through a range of modernist styles. There was deep purpose and meaning in what Middleton did. This is reinforced by a series of four dramatic and highly calligraphic ink drawings Middleton dated to January 1944 and inscribed 'The Prophet'. These are closely connected to the figure of St John in the painting *Echo out of Patmos*, only painted between September and November 1949, and one of Middleton's strangest and most intense works. Whether these ideas were in Middleton's head for a number of years, or whether this gap in time represents a

---

[464] Hickey, Patrick, *The Leader*

[465] Middleton to Hewitt, 5-13 October 1947

[466] Johnson wrote of this transaction in his autobiography *The Other Side of Six*, and also discussed it with the present author in conversation, so the presumed date for this drawing on canvas is no later than April 1947.

slow and conscious process of evolution it demonstrates a very different sense of Middleton's process.

The effectiveness of technique clearly concerned him. A series of drawings of primitive-looking heads made between April and October 1948 construct the head in a series of broad and blunt strokes that might be an attempt to evolve an appropriate way of handling paint. The effect of such experiments appears evident in paintings such as *Speculators*, of January 1949, or *The Power and the Glory* from the autumn of that year. It would, of course, be entirely natural for a trained designer, such as Middleton, to weigh up the effect of such marks and of any way of working, so that, paradoxically, the transition away from a more linear and precise style to an apparently more instinctive expressionism is actually a clear sign of the resilience of the instincts of the designer.

The critics themselves saw this new way of working as a 'clean break' that established a new mature phase of Middleton's work as a full-time painter, indicating his concentration on direct emotional expression of powerfully universal subjects in the treatment of which the pigment and the paint surface itself became as important as the image or, rather, became the crucial element through which the image took shape. Style is now important only as it equates with content; in itself it is not significant, neither is the subject meaningful purely on its own terms, as one might have seen in Middleton's earlier consideration of symbols.

Even more significant than the fact of being able to paint full-time is the consistency of Middleton's work within these years. There was a deliberate and unashamed diversity of styles in Middleton's first solo exhibition in 1943 that typified his work from 1931 to the beginning of 1948, but during the years that became synonymous with Waddington he could concentrate on producing a body of work for each exhibition, rather than painting individual or small groups of work that were not necessarily conceived as an entity.[467] At last he had the space to evolve a particular voice and the emotional and practical support of Waddington in doing so.

[467] Middleton's Opus 1 demonstrates a range of styles even while it is conceived as a united whole, as discussed in Chapter 2, Part 2.

In a letter to John Hewitt in 1947 Middleton signalled his desire to paint in a different manner, one which he saw as less derived from, and less connected with, his background as a designer. Rather than his paintings being 'the translation of a linear drawing into paint',[468] he wanted to achieve a more physically significant paint surface, maintaining the calligraphic quality of his work but translating that into plastic pigment, what he calls 'calligraphic paint'. The precise meaning of this becomes clear in the summer of 1948, once Middleton has moved back to Belfast and re-established his studio. The paintings of this period consistently build up their surface through repeated cursive strokes of impasto, with expressively distorted formal description and heightened palette. The seriousness of intent with which Middleton approached this new manner of working is demonstrated by a short handwritten note that accompanied the completion of *Rahab's Daughter* on 5 September 1952. In this painting he found 'At last, the quality of paint for which I have striven so long'.

> Here at last is pigment which has somehow transferred itself to canvas with the minimum of interference on my part. The paint looks just the same on the canvas as it did on the mixing-slab and on the knife. In that brief excursion it has done no more than organise itself.[469]

Middleton's subject matter also became more consistent in the summer of 1948. Working on the land in Suffolk seems to have given him fresh confidence as a landscape painter and the intensity of the vision he created of the various places he visited between June and October, such as Carnmoney, Cushendall, Dunglow and Glenwherry, which led on to the depiction of the countryside around Ardglass and North Down throughout this period with Waddington, is a radical departure from the more topographically descriptive Ulster landscape painting that had preceded him.

The inventive, imagined multi-figure compositions that continued through to *Elijah* and *The Toy Box*, both painted early in 1948, are transformed at the close of the decade in even more ambitious works such as *Isaiah 54* (January to March 1950) and *Hunter's Moon* (which was begun in 1951), in which the canvas is filled with figures in an

[468] Middleton to Hewitt, 5-13 October 1947
[469] Unpublished note dated 5 September 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

unsettling and almost confrontational manner. The single figure, usually but not invariably female, also became a subject to which Middleton turned regularly and whose clothes and location tend to remain unspecific. These paintings are usually titled with a single name, often with Biblical or religious connotations, such as Teresa, Jacob, Judith, Rachel, Miriam, lending them universality and meaning as much as it suggests an individual identity. A painting such as *Hallowe'en*, inspired by the fishing community of Ardglass, reflects his experience of a specific place and its customs and history, but also has a strongly mystical element and a sense of transcendence borne through suffering. The reference to van Gogh in the starry sky is surely deliberate as it reinforces this sense of life lived at an emotional and physical extreme.

While this period is seen as marking a definite break from Middleton's earlier work, if the decade leading up to it is examined closely it is clear that there are continuing themes and ideas and that the stylistic changes enjoyed a long period of gestation. *The Refugee* of 1944 is, in its iconography, not unlike a number of paintings in the 1943 exhibition, with its awkwardly arranged houses and a tree on a hillside rather reminiscent of the tone of a fairy tale. But the central female figure, pulling a blanket around her exposed body, while her eyes are closed within a mask-like face marks a transformation of mood and intent and this becomes one of the first works to find a more intense key of colour and emotional expression, paring back the symbolic elements of the work to allow a more primal force to emerge. The brushwork occasionally achieves the descriptive distortions that can be seen even more clearly in a two paintings from the beginning of 1947, *Sardines*, a claustrophobic domestic scene, and *Lazarus*, a painting Middleton later suggested was anti-Catholic and which was regarded by John Hewitt as marking the beginning of a change in Middleton's work.

> I felt from the 'Lazarus' piece that great things were about to happen and I remain safe in that belief.[470]

The angry political commentary of *Lazarus* re-appears after a nine-month gap during which practical issues had prevented Middleton from painting, in *The Ventriloquist* and

[470] Letter from John Hewitt to Colin Middleton, 4 November 1947, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

The Promised Land, which prefigure the dispossessed wandering figures of the expressionist period and which seem inspired by the images that began to emerge from the concentration camps in 1945 and which must have taken some time for Middleton to absorb and to find a way to react to on canvas. The heavy theatricality of the former two and of *The Refugee* is less apparent in *The Promised Land*, which is the first painting of this expressionist period to use a title drawn from the Bible to suggest a broader narrative and thematic weight, without requiring the iconography of the painting alone to carry its symbolism.

In both of these the paint surface begins to become the conduit for much of Middleton's message with pigment used directly to evoke a turbulent mood around expressive formal distortions. But he returned at the beginning of 1948 to a group of four finely-rendered imagined compositions on the borderline of surrealism and symbolism and full of literary allusion, which could have been painted several years earlier, suggesting that perhaps he had not reached the point at which he could immerse himself completely in this new way of working.

While John Hewitt commented on the loss of the mysticism of Middleton's earlier work during these years, paintings of this period do in many ways remain driven by mysticism and symbols and arguably merely articulate a new method of integrating these within a more direct pictorial concept. The female archetype appears throughout the Opus 1 paintings in a variety of guises and treatments, from the smoothly-finished idealised physical form of *The Fortune Teller*, to what Hewitt described as 'green luminous phosphorescent mothers and children with intense decay and death screaming out of them',[471] to naïvely depicted girls in fairytale dresses and imagined, idealised landscapes. This central symbol remains key to the expressionist period from the late 1940s to the late 1950s but it has settled into a more defined form which is presented without the often complicated trappings of the earlier work. Male figures are rare; with the exception of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, they are usually shown in relation to a woman. In multi-figure compositions such as *Isaiah 54* or *Hunter's Moon*, there is a dominant female figure around whom the composition is arranged.

[471] John Hewitt to Patrick Maybin, 22 July 1941, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/3/12

Despite the stylistic differences in presentation, these women are connected to the women and girls in the earlier work, representing suffering, redemption, attributes of place and the meeting-point of the physical and the spiritual. But where these attributes were often divided between different images, in the paintings of the expressionist period we can perhaps see the integration about which Middleton had written in 1943, uniting these themes within a single figure or a group, whose particular internal dynamic and whose relationship to their environment expresses powerful universal conditions.

Much as Middleton's own personal experience of suffering and the experience of the Blitz informed the narrative of the 1943 exhibition, in some ways the broader sense of suffering and questioning in the aftermath of war shapes Middleton's response to a particular place and people who might seem isolated from such events. But these paintings find in the experience of the local place an encapsulation of something intensely human and also ultimately transcendent. While the earlier period of works presents innocence as the key to the power of the female archetype, in the paintings of the late 1940s and 1950s Middleton posits this same power represented and literally embodied by a series of women who are defined by the depth of their experience of life and particularly by the transformative experience of suffering.

Edward Sheehy described the figure in *Teresa* as 'the accustomed victim of years of petty cruelties and petty tyrannies' but recreated in the painting with 'such warmth of pity and depth of understanding that it brings to light an obscure but abiding spiritual beauty'.[472] According to Middleton, through experience she has reached a 'state of awareness right on the threshold of the Kingdom of Heaven'.[473] *Teresa* was included in the first Waddington exhibition in 1949. The work made between the summer of 1948, when it was painted, and the late 1950s is exceptionally coherent pictorially, emotionally and thematically and demonstrates a maturity and self-awareness in Middleton that flourished within the professional context that Waddington created. Although he carried on working in a similar manner once the relationship with his

[472] Sheehy, Edward, 'Colin Middleton', *Envoy*, Volume 2, April 1950, p.
[473] Middleton, Colin, note on *Teresa*, 1949

dealer had broken down it becomes clear at the end of the 1950s that he is struggling to find a new voice.

The consistent creative identity displayed within the work of this period must also have made it much easier for Waddington to promote Middleton to galleries, writers and collectors, without the image of the artist being complicated by the range of styles and subjects that could have been associated with him until this point. The work of this period seems to reveal a man who had apparently left behind the dominant identity of designer that had shaped his weekday life since the age of seventeen.

4.5

This period marked a further change. Dora Middleton, a powerful presence in her son's life, died in January 1949. Colin and Kate left the house at Chichester Avenue and after a brief spell living on University Road they decided to move to Ardglass, a place that was to become inextricably linked with the development of Middleton's work over the next few crucial years. By the end of June they were established there and the first painting to refer to the area in its title was painted in August.

Although Middleton always linked his self-discovery as a landscape painter to the year in Suffolk, it was in Ardglass that Middleton first seems to have found a landscape that he could transform in line with his own powerful vision at that time. In 1950 he wrote to thank a friend, Maurice Fridberg, for a book of van Gogh drawings that he said would be 'a constant source of energy to keep my eye focused on the central theme – the good earth'.[474] These landscapes can be seen as marking a new period in Middleton's work, but they also maintain a central aspect of his personal symbolism that continued beyond this period, the identification of landscape with the figure. They are transformed by a passion and intensity in their treatment that differentiates the paintings from the more intellectual and schematic approach of the earlier and later

[474] Undated letter from Colin Middleton to Maurice Fridberg, around February 1950, Private Collection

works. *Hallowe'en* remains a defining example of this, and it is telling that in the same letter to Maurice Fridberg Middleton refers to *The Potato Field*, one of his favourite works of this period, as a self-portrait.

The significance of Middleton's new approach to painting, the technique that was discussed with Hewitt, lies in its complete alignment with the emotional, as well as pictorial, expression that becomes the essence of the work. Middleton's friend Bruce Barr discussed this in an article apparently commissioned by Victor Waddington in 1950.

> …in some of the recent landscapes the integration of the object and the response is most complete and technique hardly a thing to notice separately, though its power and absorption are the same if not greater. Though I conceed [sic] the power of the figure paintings it is in the landscapes of recent date where I think I find the future.[475]

Once the Middletons were settled in Ardglass, the ratio of landscapes to figure paintings began to move in the direction the former and one can sense his excitement at being settled there and with all his time devoted to painting. Following a first visit in July, Kathleen's father describes the house, 'which at first sight has much to commend it as a desirable residence and no doubt it will so prove until the winter's gales howl through the baronial hall'.[476] Ongoing problems with this house were to put Middleton under financial strain throughout the most intense years of his work with Waddington and the resulting tension was to become a central part of the problems between them.

This was still ahead. Waddington visited in October, William Giddens again commenting that he 'was very nice. Really.'[477] The momentum created by his exhibition was continued. The *Dublin Magazine* picked out Middleton's paintings in the Royal Hibernian Academy and Irish Exhibition of Living Art for comment and he was made an Academician of the Ulster Academy in the same year. Around March 1950 the first of a number of touring exhibitions organised by Waddington in which Middleton's work

---

[475] Lionel Bruce Barr, *Colin Middleton – Notes on Some Recent Paintings*, 8 May 1950
[476] William Giddens Diary, 9 July 1949, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[477] Ibid., 21 October 1949

was included opened and was 'received with terrific enthusiasm'.[478] A brief note on Middleton had appeared in *The Studio*, written by James White as part of a general survey of Irish painting, and a larger article was planned for *Envoy*, which was eventually written by Edward Sheehy.

By January 1951 Waddington had established a working relationship with the Tooth Gallery in London, which was to promise much for Middleton. It was perhaps not ideal for him to begin with a group exhibition, showing alongside Johnson, O'Neill, Dillon and Thurloe Conolly, as he wrote to Waddington that 'I can't help wishing that something could happen to vary this group consistency'; there were also a number of paintings he would have liked to have had seen in London, such as *Rachel Listening*, *Teresa* and *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* that had either been sold or else had been shipped to a touring exhibition in the USA. Despite this Middleton must have been buoyed to hear that a director of Tooth's, Richard Smart, had been enthusiastic about his work when he visited Dublin to select work for the group exhibition, so much so that Waddington felt 'we can be pretty certain he will want a one-man show'.[479]

This took place in October 1952; the list Waddington sent to Middleton of the works selected ended with a short handwritten note to say that it 'looks a wonderful exhibition'.[480] In January 1953 *The Studio* included a review as part of their round-up of autumn exhibitions in London. G.S. Whittet wrote that 'Colin Middleton is without doubt one of the few Irish painters who can claim more than a local significance' and concluded by asserting that, in Middleton, Ireland 'has a lyric and expressive painter who takes his place in international culture.'[481] In September of the same year a substantial and richly-illustrated article devoted to Middleton, written by the Dublin critic Edward Sheehy, was again published by *The Studio*. Middleton had only been painting full-time since the very end of 1948, but already his work was being shown and promoted by one of the leading commercial galleries in London, receiving

[478] Undated letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, probably around March 1950, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[479] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 6 April 1951, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[480] List of paintings and handwritten note from Victor Waddington, undated, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[481] G.S. Whittet, 'London Commentary, *The Studio*, London, Volume 145, 1953, 26

significant attention in the art press and had been acquired by well-known figures such as Sydney Box, E.J. Power, Sir Bronson Albery and William MacQuitty. Another solo exhibition was being planned for Dublin in 1953.

But this activity and the early optimism of their arrangement had begun to show the first cracks as early as 1950. The health problems that plagued both Middleton and Waddington recur as a regular theme in their correspondence, alongside their financial difficulties. William Giddens notes with concern, 'Things are not too prosperous at the Folly – though as usual all appears bright and cheerful on the surface. But stories of sold shares and frightening expenses belie the vision serene.'[482]

Picture sales in Dublin still appear to be slow, although Waddington is confident that 'Things will be a bit easier here soon, and ultimately we will be selling more than the advances; so there will be a lump credit'. The key to the problems that were eventually to cause the breakdown of their relationship actually lay in the generous terms of Waddington's original agreement with Middleton. As he was in effect paying for pictures before they were sent to him, Waddington had assumed that he would be able to sell sufficient paintings to make up this advance. When he did not, he took paintings himself to cover the salary paid. Therefore not only was he placing himself under financial pressure by doing this, it also meant that Waddington began to acquire such numbers of Middleton's paintings that exhibitions were increasingly made up of paintings being sold by the dealer from this group, sales of which then brought in no further payment for the artist, alongside those that were still owned by the artist and from which he could profit.

For example, between the beginning of June 1950 and the end of May 1951, sales of Middleton's paintings came to £570. By that time the monthly salary paid by Waddington had risen to £70, so that even with the various exhibitions organised there was still no credit for Middleton. One example of how this arrangement, intended to be jointly beneficial, worked out in practice was the sale of *Potato Field: October*. This painting was agreed for sale to Middleton's friend Maurice Fridberg early in 1950, in part exchange for Teresa. It was then sent to America as part of the touring exhibition

[482] William Giddens Diary, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

'New Irish Painters', on loan from a private collection. Whatever then occurred, this work does not appear in lists of sales, rather it is on a list of 'Proposed Purchases' sent to Middleton in April 1952, these purchases designed to be set against the advances paid to the artist when there were not sufficient sales made. £35 is listed against the painting. There is no confirmation whether this was accepted by Middleton, but it seems likely he agreed to Waddington's suggestions. Perhaps Maurice Fridberg had changed his mind or was unable to pay for the painting. It was then included in the 1953 exhibition of Middleton's work in Dublin priced at £100. Middleton began to express his frustration to his dealer.

Remarkably, having been so desperate to escape from the linen industry, in February 1953 Middleton began to suggest to Waddington that he had 'discussed possibilities of obtaining designing work with the firm for whom I had most to do previously.'[483] Along with the closure of the train line and a general isolation from friends and other artists this seems to have been a central reason for the Middletons moving to Bangor. By May, he had realised how much the linen industry had changed in the last six years.

> There is no damask being made at present thanks to Plastic cloths. I have had several small screen-printing jobs from the one firm which I approached – interesting work itself, but, as you know, drastically exacting and, considered in terms of expended energy to remuneration, bloody hard work.[484]

Clearly he had been driven to this by concern over how much he could rely on Waddington's continued support, and perhaps there was also an attempt to apply some pressure on him by suggesting that the supply of work could be affected by the need to take this work, writing that he will have to 'get some painting in before any possible designing may turn up with the Autumn buyers.'

> I have been round a couple more factories without material benefit but I feel that I should stand a very good chance of getting any work that is going. Plastics

[483] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 17 February 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[484] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 12 May 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

> and Purchase Tax seem to be the deadly enemies but the trade is being kept going on something.[485]

Middleton's experiences at this time provide an insight into the transformation within the linen industry in Belfast in less than a decade. The seriousness of the domestic and professional situation that had led to this decision to look for design work again is underlined by the extent to which Middleton had made it clear five years previously that he had made a clean break with design to be able to work as a full-time painter,[486] allied to which was his considered and deliberate development as a painter away from the style of working associated with his role as a full-time designer.

The complexity of Middleton's situation is demonstrated by his relationship with the coalescing group of creative talents who had become involved in design in Dublin in the early 1950s. In 1951 the Arts Council of Ireland was established and one of its central aims was to promote industrial design and to increase public awareness of, and appreciation for, contemporary design. The Design Research Unit of Ireland was set up soon after this, clearly inspired by the Design Research Unit, which had been set up in England in 1943. It is intriguing to see the connections between this group and the experience and theory of contemporary design that had been a significant part of art in Ulster in the 1930s. The catalogue for the 1954 International Design Exhibition included an essay by Herbert Read, a lightning rod for John Hewitt, John Luke, Middleton and others in determining positions within contemporary art theory and practice in the post-war period, and another essay, by John McGuire, a keen amateur painter and the owner of the well-known Dublin store Brown Thomas, reflected the utopian aspirations within design that had come through the Victorians into the modern period.

---

[485] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 12 August 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

[486] Even in February 1949, the 'Irishman's Diary' describes his desire to make a 'clean break' from damask design after devoting twenty years to it.

> To achieve good design the manufacturer and his workmen must be educated in principles of good design.[487]

When McGuire's theories were taken further, however, as in his essay for the Irish Design Exhibition 1956, they certainly diverge from Middleton's theory that the artist/designer should be involved with the manufacturing process. They also mark a break from the Arts and Crafts sympathies associated with Irish design from earlier in the twentieth century, suggesting that the designer 'should subordinate his design to his machine, to the resources and requirements of his employer, and to the desires of the consuming public.'[488]

A number of leading contemporary artists were involved with the Design Research Unit of Ireland, including Louis le Brocquy and Patrick Scott, as well as Thurloe Conolly who was one of its founder members. Around 1954, John McGuire also organised the Exhibition of Irish Linens. He had commissioned designs from various artists represented by Waddington, including Nevill Johnson, Louis le Brocquy, Thurloe Conolly and Hilary Heron. Perhaps Middleton was not asked to take part in this, or perhaps, not being a Dublin resident, he was not part of this circle. But one would imagine that his background would have encouraged McGuire to include him and there is some irony that Middleton, a trained designer, could not find work in this field at a time when his fellow-artists were being encouraged to experiment in it.

> I admit that the failure of such prospects as I was led to believe existed in the linen end has come as a very hard knock. It has made my move to Bangor of very slight advantage indeed.[489]

The twin identities of designer and artist and the dialectic they had established had been explored in Middleton's early career. In the catalogue for the 1944 exhibition of Irish Contemporary Art at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney it was noted that his

---

[487] E.A. McGuire, catalogue for International Design Exhibition, 1954, quoted in Turpin, John, 'The Irish design Reform Movement of the 1960s', *Design History: An Anthology*, Dennis P. Doordan (ed.), MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England, 2000, p.254
[488] Ibid., p.255
[489] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 10 November 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

'profession of textile designer has imbued him with discipline and care for design which are apparent in all his work.'[490] It is intriguing to see that this is placed in a very different but equally positive light as guaranteeing the independence of an artist who 'gets his bread and butter by other work' in an anonymous review of the 1943 Belfast Museum and Art Gallery exhibition. He had never projected himself as the typical 'artistic type' of the period. In the catalogue for the 1944 Sydney exhibition, he is described as 'not given to café lounging and art talk'.[491] The 'Irishman's Diary' in the *Irish Times* described Middleton at his first Waddington show in 1949 as looking 'more like a professional golfer than an artist', with 'nothing of the aesthete either in his appearance or his manner'.[492]

Certainly as Middleton established an independent identity as a full-time painter no longer involved with linen design, it is possible to see him accepting positive aspects of the designer's profession that had not seemed so apparent in 1947. Perhaps this only indicates mild nostalgia for his own past, or the pendulum that characterises this dialectic in his life swinging back towards a part of his life he was now confident he had left behind. In his 1952 correspondence with Sheila Greene concerning a draft of an article she had written about him, Middleton reveals pride in his father's legacy and in his own design work, which seemed to grow as he became more distanced from this role and increasingly set, at least publicly, against the art establishment and training that he had once aspired to, claiming that 'I'm not an art school product'.

> Being an industrial designer, I was reared that way…First you cultivate speed, and then accuracy; the two together are absolutely essential.'[493]

Yet his absence from the McGuire exhibition perhaps indicates that Middleton remained keen to separate his public image in Dublin from being connected with the identity as a designer he had worked hard to shake off. As he had not exhibited in Belfast since 1945, Middleton apparently had no such concerns about maintaining both roles in his home city.

---

[490] *Contemporary Irish Art*, David Jones Gallery, Sydney, 1944
[491] *Contemporary Irish Art*, David Jones Gallery, Sydney, 1944
[492] 'Irishman's Diary', *Irish Times*, 4 March 1949
[493] Colin Middleton quoted in Harriet Cooke, 'Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 25 January 1973

None of these issues would have been evident to any observers of Middleton's exhibitions at this time. There are small changes in his work. The series of powerful multi-figure compositions painted between 1949 and the spring of 1951, such as *Give Me to Drink*, *The Power and the Glory*, *Isaiah 54*, *The Life Everlasting* and *Manna*, which demonstrate Middleton's enduring interest in the Old Testament and fit into a resurgence of post-war British and Irish art related to Christianity and employing Biblical iconography, disappear and Middleton concentrates increasingly on the landscape, with occasional single figures.

The strange relationship of Middleton's life to his painting is exemplified at this point by the series of marvellously confident, colourful and lyrical canvases of the landscape around Bangor that he painted at this most difficult of times. But, as with so many of Middleton's landscapes, these remain connected to the symbolism that defines his work.

> …my spiritual roots are too firmly nourished in Zion and watered by the Jordan …You see, I do believe that my Jacob's feet (which together with the Angel do not appear in the painting) are firmly planted on the good earth. I further like to feel that there is honest dirt in his fingernails. I recognise no heaven outside or beyond the world of men for such is my horizon, my conception of infinity…To move into metaphor, I find myself thinking in terms of grain, of Wheat, Oats and Barley. Perhaps that is why, at the tender age of Forty-two, I am making my first tentative efforts to paint cornfields. Perhaps when I have at length personified my cornfields in the nude torso of a young woman…who knows?[494]

4.6

By 1954 the change in Middleton's relationships with both Waddington and Hewitt has become clear. After some discussion and uncertainty it was agreed that a retrospective

[494] Letter from Colin Middleton to Sheila Greene, 12 September 1952, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

exhibition of Middleton's painting between 1944 and 1954 would be held in Belfast, either at the CEMA gallery in Donegall Place or the Belfast Museum gallery at Stranmillis. At first the former appealed to Middleton as it offered more possibilities of sales, but apart from the 'continuous run of appalling mediocrities in constant procession being displayed there' Middleton considered the gallery 'a dump'[495], so John Hewitt had been asked to raise the prospect of a show at the Museum with Jack Loudan, the director.

By September, when the exhibition opened, Middleton appears hardly to have been in contact with Waddington, writing to say that he assumes his dealer will not be at the opening, which promises to be a 'miserably dull affair'. In thanking Waddington for his help with the exhibition and comparing his Dublin gallery favourably to Stranmillis, there is a slightly regretful and almost valedictory tone to the letter. Middleton comments that he 'should very much like to have heard your comments on Hewitt's job of hanging', suggesting by his emphasis that he was not impressed by it.

The exhibition included some works for sale as well as a number of loans from significant collectors, such as Sir Bronson Albery, William MacQuitty, Sydney Box, Lord Killanin and E.J. Power. The idea of borrowing major works had been intended to impress the Belfast audience as much as to ensure Middleton was represented by his best paintings from the period. While to the public this show must have seemed a sign of Middleton's success since the last time he had exhibited in Belfast almost a decade earlier, in reality it demonstrated his sudden isolation. Waddington appears to have had little interest in the exhibition by the time it was hanging and it was left to Hewitt to once again emerge as the apologist for Middleton's work.

In two reviews, written for the Irish Times and the Belfast Telegraph, Hewitt leads the viewer from 'the earlier meticulous draughtsmanship, delicate brushwork and gentle mysticism'[496] that would have been familiar to those who had seen his 1943 and 1945 exhibitions in Belfast, to the recent paintings 'using strong colour and boldly distorted

[495] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 17 September 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[496] *Irish Times*, 8 September 1954

shapes',[497] in which 'he informs his potato-headed, clumsy figures, ugly and awkward as they may appear, with meaning, with humanity, with a pathetic kind of dignity'.[498]

Despite Hewitt's claims that in the last ten years Middleton has become established 'as one of the leading painters of this country' and that 'For me the gentle 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel' has long seemed one of the major achievements of contemporary Irish painting', his praise is not all-encompassing and he digresses to discuss Middleton's independence as a painter and the influences that he has absorbed from other artists. Despite his early conviction of Middleton's 'genius', Hewitt occasionally seemed quite uncertain of his direction, even in the early exhibitions with which he was most involved.

The swift and painful disintegration of Middleton's relationship with Waddington occurred around this time. Although he continued to paint, this particularly fertile period began to stutter as Middleton was forced to take a teaching post in Coleraine, having previously discussed this as a 'last ditch'. It is intriguing to speculate whether in some ways Middleton had become dependent on Waddington to be able to paint; perhaps he had become the audience for which Middleton worked, on whose judgement he had become more dependent than he realised. Waddington had for several years provided Middleton with the absolute assurance that he believed he was a painter of true worth and that his work would be seen by the public in the best and most appropriate context.

Suddenly there was no first reaction to work from a man whose judgement he could trust, and who he knew was in sympathy with his aims. There was no voice pushing him to produce work or to guarantee that it would be exhibited. Waddington had fitted into a succession of male figures within Middleton's artistic life, each representing a different side to the question of his creative identity, following his father, John Hewitt and John Middleton Murry. He was the last of this line, arguably the most powerful in Middleton's life and the one with whom his artistic identity had been liberated, before the damaging events of the mid-1950s took their toll.

---

[497] *Belfast Telegraph*, 13 September 1954
[498] *Irish Times*, 8 September 1954

Middleton was now in the strange position of having paintings that no longer belonged him included in exhibitions of new work. This was what the 'partnership' had come to. By this stage Waddington had purchased so many pictures to write off the advance payments to Middleton that he could actually stage a Middleton exhibition himself without involving the artist. This was exactly what happened next. In the summer of 1955, Waddington held an exhibition of paintings by Middleton covering the years 1939 to 1954, all taken from his own stock. It appears only to be in a letter from the dealer that Middleton first hears about this and his reaction is not recorded. Waddington's letter is in response to one in which Middleton apologised for some comments and accusations he had made before then, and Waddington accepts his apology. By this stage Middleton had apparently decided that Waddington's policy had been cynical for some time and that he had been deliberately trying to undermine and terminate their relationship, even to 'smother sales'.[499] Waddington recounts that he had continued to pay Middleton a regular salary far outstripping sales even when the gallery was in severe difficulties, implying that this was partly due to his guilt at Middleton's own problems.

Not only did Waddington include only his pictures in the 1955 exhibition, but it also appears that he had begun to reduce prices to encourage sales now that he no longer had an interest in maintaining Middleton's works at their previous level. He justifies this by saying that he has used some cheaper frames in this exhibition, but refers to a 'sale' he will have when the gallery lease is disposed of, which must have unnerved the artist. It is sad to read that 'probably, this will be the last exhibition', after so much struggle, promise and passion in the past six and a half years. The move to London they had discussed in 1950 was almost within reach, yet Middleton was no longer part of it.

It must have exacerbated Middleton's frustration ever further that just before this exhibition at Dublin's most significant commercial gallery was to open, he put on the first solo exhibition at a new gallery on Central Avenue in Bangor. The gallery appears to have been short-lived. John Hewitt reviewed the exhibition at this 'small gallery' for the Belfast Telegraph and commented that they were mostly smaller works than had

[499] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 15 June 1955, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

been in the 1954 exhibition at Stranmillis but it is telling that he writes 'In The Wild Goose, alone among the canvases do we glimpse the old legendary quality which once occurred so abundantly.' Hewitt's own liking for the symbolism and fine draughtsmanship of the earlier works (in 1944 he had written that he preferred 'the defined, the disciplined'[500]) is evident in a comment on an 'exquisite little drawing without a title of a mythological woman poised against a great tree and attended to by strange bird-like ministrants' which 'should remind us…that, at his best, Colin Middleton can integrate imagination and craftsmanship to a marvellous degree.'[501]

Middleton's work appears in two exhibition at Waddington's in 1956, 'Thirty Years at the Victor Waddington Galleries' in February and then a summer group exhibition of ceramics, drawings and other media. Waddington seemed to assume that Middleton would continue to show at Tooth's, but this did not happen. An attempt to re-establish contact with them through the Magee Gallery in Belfast when he first showed there in 1962 was ineffective.

Middleton regarded Waddington's actions as a betrayal of what he saw as their jointly-agreed long-term plans, and it left a deep-seated distrust of art dealers that seems at times to have surfaced in arguments with a number of the galleries with whom he later worked. Waddington did argue that he tried to maintain the salary he was paying Middleton for as long as possible, even after he had reduced or stopped these payments to other artists. It was undeniably a remarkable gesture of confidence for Waddington to propose a contract such as that which he and Middleton had agreed in 1948. For several years, despite irregular sales and an exhausting schedule that must have taken a physical toll, Waddington had shown immense dedication to promoting Middleton's work in Dublin and beyond and Middleton had become a leading figure in Waddington's stable and had helped form his reputation as a defining figure in contemporary taste. Ultimately the strain of financial pressures told on both of them. For Middleton it became insupportable to be under contract to provide paintings for a

[500] Hewitt, John, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', *Now in Ulster*, Arthur Campbell and George Campbell, Belfast 1944, p.16
[501] Macart (John Hewitt), 'Middleton Paintings at New Bangor Gallery', *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 May 1955

gallery who could not guarantee him any regular payment, particularly when he considered that they had a dwindling incentive to sell them.

There is no correspondence to provide details of the final arguments and disagreements that they had, so that it is impossible to know on which side the break was made, but Waddington denied that there was any 'attitude or endeavour to terminate' their relationship.[502] While Waddington's ambition to move to London seems to have been a powerful motivation for Middleton too, as well as a reassurance at difficult moments, there must have been a point at which the plans for the gallery changed, in terms of the artists with whom Waddington would continue to work or with whom it was most practical to work, so that Middleton was not to be included. Having devoted himself to painting solely for Waddington since the end of 1948 and having endured hardship as well as success, it must have been galling for Middleton to be left without a gallery to show his new work while paintings he did not own were being sold in Dublin. The vulnerability of the artist is strikingly evident in the fact that Middleton only heard about the 1955 retrospective exhibition once it was underway. With both Middleton Murry and Waddington it appears that a breakdown in their communications with Middleton, as well as the pressure caused by outside events exacerbated misunderstandings and ambiguities that led him to read the worst motivations into their actions.

Setting up in Cork Street was to mark the beginning of the next stage for Victor Waddington, towards international prominence and financial success. He also opened a gallery in Montreal, which was run by his brother George and where Daniel O'Neill exhibited; otherwise he moved away from most of the Irish artists the gallery had shown in Dublin, with the obvious exception of Jack Yeats, whose reputation and prices were to continue to grow, thanks in no small part to Waddington.

While the years during which he worked with Waddington did transform Middleton's work and also enhanced his reputation as an artist to the point at which he was widely accepted in the early 1950s as the leading artist of his generation in Ireland, this makes

[502] Letter from Victor Waddington to Colin Middleton, 15 June 1955, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

one consider all the more what it might have led on to had they managed to continue to work together. Middleton had become a full-time painter who did not need to make any compromises by taking on other work. His creative identity had changed, but through force of circumstances it was about to change again. Throughout the period he was exhibiting with Waddington, Middleton's paintings maintained a remarkable technical and stylistic consistency. The late 1950s brought him to a new landscape and new circumstances within his life and a gradual change begins in his painting as he engages with these.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLIN MIDDLETON

5.1

In 1957 Colin Middleton was as isolated professionally as he had been in the thirty years since he had left school. John Hewitt had left Belfast and the Museum that year when he was appointed Director of the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, having been passed over for promotion several years earlier, apparently because his socialist and anti-sectarian views had alienated the Museum's committee. Roberta Hewitt wrote shortly before this decision was made the Hewitt 'cannot say what he really feels he should and keep his job'.[503] The local establishment appears to have been confused by his very publicly expressed position.

> It must be difficult for our authorities to think that an Ulsterman could have a great affection for 'Ulster' without hating either Eire or England.[504]

Anne Crookshank was appointed to his role as Keeper of Art at the Belfast Museum and Art Gallery. Her previous post at the Tate Gallery had placed her firmly at the centre of the international art world and she remained close with many London contacts, including Ronald Alley, who had been a colleague at the Tate and a driving force behind their 1956 exhibition of twentieth century American art and the 1959 Abstract Expressionism exhibition. S.B. Kennedy noted the significance of this transition.

> There was a dramatic change in what Hewitt was trying to do for local artists and what Anne was trying to do on a broader spectrum for international artists[505]

That same year Victor Waddington opened his gallery on Cork Street in London; his long-awaited aim, towards which he and Middleton had looked forward, had been

---

[503] Roberta Hewitt Diary, 31 December 1951, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/4/7, quoted in McIntosh, Gillian, *Alternative Visions of Northern Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s*, p.183
[504] Roberta Hewitt Diary, 16 May 1949, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/4/6, ibid., p.183
[505] S.B. Kennedy, Interview with the author, 11 August 2016

achieved but they were no longer on speaking terms. By 1957 Middleton was in his second year working as art master at Coleraine Technical School, having reluctantly entered the profession he had previously rejected several years earlier, initially through part-time work at the Belfast Art College[506] before taking on this full-time role. He had no commercial gallery to represent him and was selling works privately to local acquaintances and colleagues.

> Full-time teaching…is a last ditch. I should have to sell out, body and soul. Painting, and I mean serious painting, would go by the board.[507]

The drama of the previous decade, with a turbulent year in England followed by initial success with Waddington and then a period of decline in their relationship and the collapse of their professional partnership, had left him with very few alternatives. As ever, periods of difficulty did not seem to prevent Middleton painting, although there does not, understandably, appear to be anything like the same output of works that had emerged from the first part of the decade, when there were no other distractions. As a number of works were sold privately and some were probably never exhibited, it is difficult to gain any precise idea of how prolific he was at this time.

Unlike the chameleon-like creative personality that is often associated with Middleton, the paintings of the late 1950s demonstrate a slow and painstaking development of the expressionist style that he had evolved at the end of the previous decade towards a conclusion that appears shaped by the new landscape he found on the north coast as well as by very different circumstances in his life.

June Evening, Coleraine, *The Park, Coleraine* and *Rooftops, Coleraine*, all painted between 1956 and 1957, present an almost Fauvist vision of the town, with brushwork that is at times even bolder and more obtrusive than the earlier expressionist paintings, as well as demonstrating a vibrant and non-naturalistic palette that again seems a progression within Middleton's manner of working rather than a change or a backward step.

---

[506] Mike Catto notes that Newton Penprase and Romeo Toogood encouraged him to teach at the art college.

[507] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 17 February 1953, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

It is interesting that the broader massing and blocking of shapes that represent physical structures within the landscape begin to demonstrate, in very broad terms, a less lyrical and more abstracted treatment of the landscape than in Middleton's paintings of the previous ten years. The same stylisation occurs in his treatment of natural forms as well, so that we can see Middleton evolving a new visual vocabulary that seems related to this new environment. Again, unlike many of his paintings around Ardglass and Bangor, where it is often difficult to pin down local landmarks or places, there is a sense of specific motifs and places recurring in a more defined form, such as Ballywillan Church, just outside Portrush.

This very gradual and deliberate process towards a very different way of working is similar to that through which Middleton had gone between 1944 and 1948. Middleton's work was consistent in both technique, medium, process and subject matter between the summer of 1948 and 1959. The developments of the later 1950s can be seen to develop into the basis of quite dramatic change that occurs in 1960, but a similar consistency in many ways is then present in much of his work from 1960 until well into the 1970s.

Much as the development of his particular expressionist style also denoted a different manner of using the symbols that had always been central to Middleton's work, although less noticeable in this period, so 1960 marked a further re-evaluation of the role of the symbol. The shift in tone in his work, from the passionate and at time declamatory paintings of the 1940s and 1950s, to the austere, detached, more private mood of the 1960s certainly captured his very different response to the years in which he had been represented by Waddington and the subsequent period of re-assessment that followed. These are paintings that seem to turn away from a personal involvement in the landscape, instead finding a motif, a rock form, a stone, some bark, for example, that is associated with that place and from which emerges an image that embodies the landscape through that specific form.

Bruce Barr had written in 1949 of 'landscapes where the mood of the painter has flowed into the object of his interest and animated it for us';[508] in 1960 the painter

[508] Bruce Barr, 'Colin Middleton: Notes on Some Recent Painting', unpublished note, Private Collection

himself almost seems to have become absent, or certainly concealed, and determined only to find a voice through which the landscape itself can be expressed. Middleton concentrates on pattern and texture both in the image that emerges and also in the preparation of the board and the paint surface itself. As occurred with the development of Middleton's expressionist style, there is emphasis on the physical attributes of the work as a signifier of meaning, but in these works from the 1960s there is a deliberately stylised and repetitive approach that marks a clear break from his intention in the previous decade to suggest a spontaneous and expressive use of paint that is directly and universally communicative.

If the period after 1947 represented a defining escape from design work and its influence on Middleton's art, it seems that 1960 represented a re-engagement with this in his work at a point when he had realised that he was no longer going to be able to use these skills professionally. Emotionally, he was perhaps reacting against Waddington by looking back to the time before he had known the Dublin dealer, much as he had at times reacted against the linen industry and his own skills associated with it at a time when it seemed an unavoidable fact of his life. This period represents another shift in the dialectic between artist and designer which remained so significant in Middleton's work, and it is the first point at which the balance begins to tip back towards design after the many years during which he had sought to escape from it.

The 1960s is the first period through which Middleton consistently used board rather than canvas. He began to work on square panels almost to the exclusion of all other formats, which was also almost unknown in his earlier work, recalling the squared paper on which he would have made damask designs. He began to prepare these boards before painting to achieve a particular pattern that would become part of the image itself, for example by moving a comb across a layer of gesso, again suggesting something of the process of weaving an image onto cloth. It is also interesting to note the changing manner in which Middleton uses drawing in the late 1950s. The exhibitions with Waddington had been the first occasions when he had not shown graphic work, either drawings or prints, although he continued to make drawings towards his paintings and to maintain sketchbooks as he always had; he was to return to including drawings in some of the first exhibitions he held after breaking with

Waddington and continued to exhibit graphic work alongside paintings, or even in a devoted exhibition, into the 1970s.

There are many drawings from the late 1940s and first half of the 1950s that are related to Middleton's expressionist paintings, small compositional studies similar to those for the surrealist and symbolist paintings of the early 1940s, often framed by a blank or, occasionally, a coloured border, demonstrating a consciousness of the presentation of his work that brings to mind Middleton's preference for placing paintings in frames to show visitors to his studio. In the second half of the 1950s Middleton seems to have returned to working on numbers of independent, highly-worked drawings and watercolours, such as those shown in the Bangor exhibition in 1955 which, remarkably, appear to have been the first works in this latter medium seen by John Hewitt and raise the question of whether he had actually previously worked very much in watercolour. The exhibition also included an 'exquisite little drawing without a title of a mythological woman poised against a great tree and attended to by strange bird-like ministrants', [509] which seems to recall the mood of his 1943 solo exhibition.

It is striking that in his first exhibition away from Waddington for a decade, Middleton included a number of works on paper. One might see in this an assertion of his own identity and control on the part of the artist, an attempt to differentiate this exhibition from those held with Waddington, or perhaps only an acknowledgement of the practicalities of selling work in a small gallery in Bangor. The latter might be more likely as Waddington always appears to have liked Middleton's drawings; he bought several on their first meeting and used one on his own Christmas card in 1950.

The drawings of the later 1950s are often in black crayon and wash, occasionally introducing colour but, as with the drawings from 1948, they seem to be deliberately evolving a technique that could be applied to Middleton's painting, in this case, with a dominant but rough line balanced by arrangements of awkwardly distorted yet recognisably organic shapes that achieve a dense abstract treatment of form. In the 1960s particularly, small watercolours and drawings became more obviously central to Middleton's process once again, but by the time a more restrained and less gestural

[509] John Hewitt, *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 May 1955

technique evolved in 1960 it appears that the marks made in the drawings also altered. It is as if drawing has again become crucial to Middleton in working out a way of painting and particularly at those points when he is moving from one dominant style into another.

5.2

There is a remarkable shift even between the conclusion of the expressionist period and the more abstract paintings of 1960 and, in the context of the enormous disappointment Middleton felt at the ending of his relationship with Waddington, this might be read as representing a rejection of their partnership as much as the embracing of a new landscape and a new period in his life. But it also goes further than this and demonstrates the enduring dynamic that drove the development in Middleton's work, in the conflict between his creative identities as painter and as designer. In 1960 there is a broad indication that style becomes as central to Middleton as content. Certainly these are in some cases the most severely non-representational works of his career, made at a time when, for a number of reasons, he might have felt more liberated to integrate design with his art.

In this context it is significant to note the role that the architect Noel Campbell played in Middleton's life in the years when he was living on the north coast, as this remarkable professional relationship is likely to have helped shape the move back towards abstraction in the late 1950s. Campbell did not occupy a role in Middleton's life comparable to Hewitt or Waddington, and he was the first influential figure in his life who was younger than the painter, but he played an unexpected and significant part in the development of this next phase of Middleton's work.

Campbell was born almost exactly ten years after Middleton, in January 1920, and, like him, was educated at Belfast Royal Academy.[510] They also shared a love of jazz. Campbell had been appointed County Education Architect for the County Londonderry

[510] See Larmour, Paul, 'Style Master', *Perspective*, Volume 5, Number 6, July-August 1997, p.18-31

Education Committee in 1948, and in the 1950s he began to make his reputation with a series of distinctly modern school buildings before completing a series of remarkable private commissions for houses in the late 1950s. It was in these projects that he engaged Colin Middleton to provide murals and mosaics both internally and externally.

There is no record of how they met or how they came to work together but there was clearly a strong sympathy between the two men. Much of Paul Larmour's description of Campbell could almost be applied to Middleton himself.

> With his keen interest in international developments and his admiration for the work of the Continental modern masters, his eclectic approach…enabled him to break through the barrier of parochial conservatism in local architecture.[511]

Their first collaboration seems to have been on the Morelli's ice cream parlour in Portstewart, for which Campbell also acted as interior designer around 1958. Close to this same time Campbell was working on a house at Dhu Varren, where Middleton had moved the previous year, so their meeting could have come about as a result of this proximity as much as through any familiarity Campbell might have had with Middleton's work.[512]

The series of paintings Middleton completed to run around the walls of the Morelli's parlour are predominantly non-referential, with occasional highly simplified figures of children and teenagers, a toy train and seaside houses mirroring the particular location of the building for which these works were made. It is a clean-cut, geometric abstraction that is a design above all else, relying on the arrangement of pattern built up through repeated abstract shapes as well as a palette that is independent of anything apart from the need for visual effect within the design. It relates to nothing in his painting at that time or in the previous decade, suggesting that Middleton was evolving a creative design identity separate to what had become his established identity as an artist. In some way this is the opposite of what had occurred in the earlier part of his career.

---

[511] Ibid, p.31

[512] Middleton appears to have contributed an abstract mural in coloured tiles to this house, which might have pre-dated the Morelli's commission.

These panels also raise the question of whether the two square panels that were used for the specific spaces within the interior (along with a number of elongated rectangular panels) were the starting-point for Middleton's interest in this format, which was to continue and become so much a part of his later work.

The following year Campbell involved Middleton in a private house commission at Strand Road, Portstewart, completed in 1958. For the Strand Road house Middleton completed a large mosaic placed at the front of the house. Considerably more abstract in manner than his painting of the time, with a suggestion of two figures within the image, it looks forward in many ways to the work of the 1960s. The severely abstract and linear treatment of form, the shallow space and the ambiguity of the image are all typical of much of Middleton's painting of the early 1960s. The technique of mosaic both necessitates and enables a way of working that, translated into painting, moves away from representation and breaks down the image into independent shapes, creating a pattern of shorter strokes of equal weighting that are decorative as much as descriptive. It is a language that Middleton used for most of the 1960s in his landscape paintings and it is significant that these collaborations appear to be its source.

The significance of working in mosaic is revealed in comparisons with paintings completed in 1960. The surface of *Sundown, Carnalridge II* is constructed with patterns of small, repeated, semi-regular shapes, mostly in a single colour that complements those around it. While this influence can be read alongside the introduction in the expressionist paintings of the late 1950s of a more patterned effect based around strong abstract shapes, it is notably close to the process of mosaic. Even in the next decade, in a painting such as *Woven Landscape, Lechenagh* of 1971, the tightly organised landscape is still built up with these small squares, lozenges and rectangles, although they have begun to be knitted together, as the title suggests, in a more interlocked manner that is almost a parallel in painting to the process of weaving. It is realistic to see the problems that Middleton found in developing his expressionism in the late 1950s in relation to new personal aims and a new landscape being, to a great extent, resolved through a re-examination of the styles and techniques of design, and this began with his work for Noel Campbell.

It is interesting to consider, in the light of the limited scope for original or innovative design during his time at Middleton and Page, as previously discussed, whether it was actually in the period that Middleton was able to actively work more creatively as a designer, rather than using his skills to reproduce other designs. The integration that Middleton discussed was undoubtedly made more possible by this exploration of a personal, independent voice as a designer, at a stage when Middleton was also a mature and comparatively confident artist.

Another project of Campbell's, a house originally called Scandia at Brocklamont Park, Ballymena, constructed in 1959-60, also involved Middleton. The mosaics he carried out around the enclosing walls of a swimming pool which appear, evoking a mood reminiscent of Picasso, to depict bathers playing with beach balls as well as fish, are again highly abstracted in a linear style, demonstrating a skill for extending and repeating pattern that must have recalled for Middleton his damask design work.

For an artist such as Middleton who was convinced that the artist should be able to play a positive social role, the 'craftsman' who is 'a vital link in the social chain', as he had written in 1943, the potential of these private and public works, especially the 'mural in a health clinic, a mosaic panel in a school'[513] that he proudly described in 1961 must have provided a clear sense of progress as he re-built his confidence as an artist.

Clare Willsdon notes that 'mural painting of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was seen by its exponents as a pinnacle of artistic achievement, sealing reputations, setting standards for wider emulation, and sometimes promising social status'.[514] Undoubtedly Middleton would simply have appreciated the money that came from these commissions; they still appear to have been struggling financially at this time and Noel Campbell was personally generous to the family. Equally, it is obvious that he embraced the challenges that this work provided. While the technical and stylistic effects of these works fed back into his painting, both in the manner of working and also in their iconography, they were almost certainly conceived by him on their own terms and as works deserving of their scale and location. The differences

[513] *Northern Whig*, 6 January 1961

[514] Willsdon, Clare A.P., *Mural Painting in Britain 1840-1940: Image and Meaning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, p.vii

between these murals demonstrate the manner in which he created each work for its specific setting and purpose, as well as to evoke a particular effect in the viewer through its formal arrangements, colour and pattern, or through its suggestions of experience or memory. Middleton's references to these works does not suggest that he saw them as peripheral to his painting in any way and perhaps he was conscious not only of the historical status of mural painting but also its very public resurgence in the post-war period.

It is interesting to note that around this time one of the contemporary artists Middleton most respected, Victor Pasmore, had completed a series of murals for new buildings in England, a process which then seems to have culminated in his appointment as Consulting Director of Architectural Design for the development of the new town of Peterlee in the late 1950s. Although the remarkable building Pasmore designed there, the Apollo Pavilion, was not completed until 1970, it was likely to have been widely discussed at the time, particularly in the circle around Noel Campbell, and it is remarkably close to Middleton's vision of the potential of the artist to engage in society and undoubtedly an additional encouragement in his own work with various architects.

During the 1950s, in the wake of the Festival of Britain, during which many murals had been commissioned to be shown at the South Bank exhibition site, there had been a remarkable upsurge in mural painting in Britain, driven by public, as well as private, commissions that would probably have altered the artist's perspective of what could be achieved through these large scale works, as well as that of the commissioner or commissioning body. The post-war period was marked by an upsurge in the construction of public, as well as domestic, buildings and the opportunity to work in a great range of materials made collaborations between artist and architect or planner provided exciting opportunities for all involved.

While Luke's commission from CEMA for a mural painting at Belfast City Hall to celebrate the Festival of Britain appears to have been necessarily narrative in structure, its archaic quality was exaggerated by the historical costumes of the figures and also by the artist's preference for fresco techniques, which remained close to the concern with material and technique that increasingly dominated his easel painting. In the early 1950s, however, the work was extremely well received in Northern Ireland and

arguably set a local template for mural painting (which Luke continued in his 1957 mural for the Rosemary Street Masonic Hall) that makes clear how radical Middleton's work for Noel Campbell was.

Despite the success of Luke's City Hall mural, such commissions remained comparatively rare in Northern Ireland. Only eighteen murals in Northern Ireland are listed in Lynn Pearson's post-war mural database; by comparison over a hundred are located in Scotland.[515] These eighteen, however, include only two of the designs Middleton carried out for Noel Campbell, as well as his later works for the Botanic Inn which, like the Morelli's murals, were painted on panels subsequently removed from the building. Luke's Festival of Britain mural for Belfast City Hall was the earliest of those listed, but by the later 1950s the nature of these projects in Northern Ireland and the artists involved appears to have broadened out considerably, with Mary Martin, Paul Feiler, Edward Bawden and William Scott all receiving substantial commissions.

The context within which Middleton was now working even locally, was therefore unusually in line with the social and aesthetic ambitions with which major contemporary artists approached such projects, incorporating them within their own works as part of their own development, rather than as separate projects to be treated differently and purely to meet the intentions of the commissioner. It seems highly likely that Middleton would have been aware of at least some of these projects and the shifting perception of mural painting that had, to a great extent, been inspired by the numerous commissions during the Festival of Britain, is evident in the ambition and sense of purpose that he found in this work. He was also one of the artists invited by Liam McCormick to contribute to the design of the interior of the new Church of St Peter at Milford, County Donegal, which was completed in 1961. Paul Larmour points out the his 'reredos in the form of an appliquéed wall hanging depicting the 'Miraculous Draught of Fishes'…was a unique commission for Middleton whose other architecturally connected work had been in the form of mosaics or tile panels, none of them for churches.'[516]

---

[515] http://www.academia.edu/5211590/Postwar_murals_database

[516] Larmour, Paul and O'Toole, Shane, *North by Northwest: The Life and Work of Liam McCormick*, Gandon Editions, Dublin, 2008, p.155

These commissions are tantalising suggestions of territory that Middleton is about to explore in his painting and as such it is important to recognise the importance of his collaborations with Noel Campbell. As the expressionist work that had defined his period with Waddington was changing dramatically in response to a very different point in his life and a new landscape that surrounded him, these works demonstrate that Middleton was again comfortable with the role of design within his life and his particular skills and they also seem to have suggested paths through which he could integrate design into his painting. The years that this integration occupied him is another indication of how painstaking Middleton was in the process of development between different styles.

This series of collaborations appears to be unique within Ulster architecture of the time and, as well as playing a significant part in the evolution of Middleton's work in the 1960s, it also can be seen within the context of British post-war mural painting and design. It is perhaps relevant that Middleton had turned down the opportunity to paint the mural for Belfast City Hall which was eventually carried out by John Luke.[517] As Middleton was enjoying a fruitful relationship with Victor Waddington at the time, and was under pressure to produce a constant supply of paintings for the various exhibitions that were planned, it might not have been practical to devote so much time to this large undertaking. It is also likely that Middleton did not feel this project would have fitted within his ambitions and his manner of working at that time[518] and this is supported by the fact that he had not been involved in the exhibition of linen designs organised around 1953 by John McGuire, owner of Brown Thomas, which included a number of Waddington's leading artists.[519] If he did not want to be involved with this it can, at least in part, be read as a clear rejection of his design background which, in

[517] McBrinn, Joseph, *Northern Rhythm: The Art of John Luke*, NMNI, Belfast, p.70

[518] Middleton did take on one commission related to the Festival of Britain, the designs to accompany a guide written by John D. Stewart as a catalogue for the exhibition *Ulster Farm and Factory*. Described as 'decorations' these are strong linear images with, in some cases, a slightly caricatural feel. Middleton described the commission from the 'Festival of Britain gentry' to Victor Waddington in a letter written on 12 February 1951 and thought some of them might lead to paintings, demonstrating where his focus lay at this time.

[519] Discussed in Part 4

by the end of the decade he once again seems able to integrate within his artistic identity and work.

5.3

Despite the significance of these commissions in the late 1950s, both artistically and financially, Middleton did remain focussed on exhibiting his work and trying to re-assert his position as an exhibiting artist after the difficulties caused by Waddington's departure. He wrote to David Hendriks in 1958 that 'I have not shown anything in Dublin since my association with Victor Waddington ceased several years ago'[520] and agreed to Hendriks' suggestion that he hold an exhibition of his work.[521]

> I have the work. I would welcome a show.[522]

Given that a number of Middleton's works had been included in the 1956 exhibition 'Thirty Years of the Victor Waddington Gallery' (presumably from the dealer's own stock), it cannot have seemed to the Irish art world anything like the hiatus in his career that it must have been in Middleton's eyes, his own relationship with Waddington having foundered around 1954. Equally, the paintings he showed that autumn included works from 1954, such as *Gipsy* and *Landscape for Kitty*, while others such as *Genesis* and *Outward Bound* contain something of the hauntingly expressive and distorted quality of some of the great early 1950s paintings.

This began a period of regular exhibiting and while Middleton's creative identity is still closer to the painter he became in 1948 than the designer he had previously been, the exhibitions of the 1960s begin to chart his re-orientation as an artist. The first of five one-man exhibitions arranged by CEMA or, as it was to become, the Arts Council for Northern Ireland within the decade, took place in 1961 in their gallery at 7 Chichester

---

[520] Letter from Colin Middleton to David Hendriks, 10 February 1958, Private Collection

[521] Cyril Barrett noted of Hendriks that 'David had gradually acquired the Northern Irish portfolio, particularly after the departure of Waddington to London' (Barrett, Cyril, *David Hendriks, Living with Art*)

[522] Middleton to Hendriks, 10 February 1958

Street,[523] and in the brief catalogue note there is an acknowledgement of this recent influence.

> The works here on view have all been painted during the last two years in Portrush and they reflect that artist's growing interest in the architectural field – several of them being studies for mural decoration.[524]

The critic of the Northern Whig seems to be quoting the artist himself in his analysis of this influence.

> Of recent years he has concerned himself more than ever with problems of decoration and permanence. He has found a fascination with murals, both exterior and interior…[525]

The satisfaction that Middleton felt at his engagement with these commissions is evident in his own descriptions of the resulting work.

> most excitingly because I think it's the best thing I've done in this line, I've done a piece of outside decoration for a man in Portrush who built his own house.[526]

The influence that they had on his painting more broadly is evident in a comment by Kathleen in an unpublished note written in the mid-1960s, that the 'new paintings combine this interest in the architectural shapes with Middleton's continuing preoccupation with landscape'.[527]

One of the *Sundown: Carnalridge* series was included in this exhibition, indicating the closeness of their own process with mural decoration. It is indicative of the scale of change that had occurred in Middleton's work that a number of these paintings have

---

[523] These were held in 1961, 1964, 1965, 1967 and 1970 (a partial retrospective that also toured to Edinburgh and Glasgow); Middleton was included in the CEMA Open Painting Competition in 1962 and 1966 and was a prizewinner in Ulster Painting '68. It is likely that Middleton was involved in the 1967 exhibition 'Contemporary Art in Ulster' at the Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield, and 'Eight Northern Irish Painters' at the New Charing Cross Gallery in 1968. Kenneth Jamison, Head of Art at CEMA, could be seen to have taken over from John Hewitt as a significant active supporter of Middleton amongst public arts bodies.

[524] 'Paintings by Colin Middleton', CEMA Art Gallery Belfast, January 1961
[525] *Northern Whig*, 3 January 1961
[526] *Northern Whig*, 6 January 1961
[527] Unpublished, undated note by Kathleen Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

entirely non–descriptive titles and even when there is a reference to a subject, they are pared back to basic details, such as *Bann Landscape*, *Roselick: June*, *Seated Figure* and *K Knitting*; the emotive, Old Testament-inspired titles that occurred in the Waddington's exhibitions, or even some of the more evocatively titled landscapes, seem to be left aside at this period, reflecting a new mood of detachment in Middleton's work. The balance has shifted away from content and from emotional involvement to an emphasis on form, where the engagement with design and abstraction certainly appears to have been shaped by this architectural influence.

While there was not the emotionally-charged vision of a troubled world and the search for redemption that had dominated the previous decade, from the end of the 1950s and into the 1960s Middleton was still making work that was highly personal and often drawn from aspects of his own life. Kathleen appears regularly, often playing the piano, knitting or reading, and there are glimpses of Alison and Jane.

The landscapes are those around where they were living, first in Portrush and Coleraine, then in Lisburn, or else where they were holidaying, in the Mournes and then around Lough Erne in Fermanagh. Middleton had always painted landscapes he knew intimately and to which he felt strongly connected, but in the 1960s there is less sense of these becoming a vehicle to express ideas or emotions that have not arisen from them but for which they act as signifier; these works are intently about the actual landscape itself. The artist is trying to find a way to paint a specific place that expresses its geological structure, its history, the local vegetation or its particular light, analysed and considered visually and intuitively, before an appropriate image is conceived or a significant motif decided on. The discipline with which he worked in the early 1960s is apparent, although this was not always welcomed by critics; Bruce Arnold sensed 'a certain coldness' and suggested 'mechanical is perhaps the word that should be used'.[528] These paintings are driven by a search for form rather than by their content, and technique and medium are also central.

Kenneth Jamison wrote in 1965 that in this idiom of his work 'the characteristics of intellect dominate, and impose upon the elements of the landscape a clear rational of

[528] Arnold, Bruce, 'Diversity of Colin Middleton', *Sunday Independent*, December 1968

organisation and balance'.[529] Increasingly Middleton appears to have been seen as a painter whose obvious craftsmanship has once again become a central aspect of his work. The critic of the *Irish News* wrote about a retrospective exhibition of Middleton's paintings from the 1960s, 'If there is sometimes a feeling that a particular work has been over-contrived, or that a too-conscious consideration has been given to certain areas of colour, it is mostly over-ridden by stronger positive qualities', and that visitors to the 'exhibition of pictures by this outstanding Northern artist are sure to witness a display of technical skill'. [530]

If the end of the previous decade was the point at which Middleton was able to move into new territory as a designer and beyond copying or interpreting designs, one might almost see the balance between design and art in his work tilting towards the former and an arguable diminishment of the qualities of pure painting within these works. But this also seems to indicate two crucial aspects of Middleton's art that had been consistently present throughout his mature work, and in particular in his painting since the war, the analysis of the female archetype in part as an expression of place and the experience of place, and also Middleton's painting of the landscape as a direct response to specific aspects of the artist's experience of it, although the aspects on which he had primarily focussed had altered from his expressionist period.

In a striking return to the discussion of the role of the work of art within the modern domestic world that characterised the ambitions of the Northern Ireland Guild of Artists and the Ulster Unit, in 1970 Derek Kinnen analysed for the Belfast Telegraph the reasons that made 'a Middleton painting so desirable', describing the technical and compositional skills of the artist and concluding that each painting 'has the decorative capacity to enhance its surroundings'.[531] This is reminiscent of the Guild seeking to relate the 'various crafts of its members…with the homes they are made to adorn',[532] but it suggests that, having rejected the decorative ideals of this period and the conscious prioritisation of technical skills above meaning and content in the late 1940s,

[529] Jamison, Kenneth, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1965
[530] CMM, *Irish News*, 4 September 1970
[531] Kinnen, Derek, *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 September 1970
[532] McVeigh, Emma, *Regionalism, modernism and identity: Sculpture in Northern Ireland, 1921-51*, unpublished PhD thesis Ulster University, 2013, p.252

Middleton's symbolism had become seen as only a part of the design of each work and had lost its impact on his critical audience despite the originality of his treatment of the local landscape at this time.

A small number of natural forms that were in Middleton's studio have been preserved in the archive held by the Ulster Museum of his studio contents, small pieces of rock, bone and wood shaped over time in distinctive ways that clearly communicated to him something of the elemental and essential nature of the landscape where they were found.

A 'strange rock formation' that Middleton had discovered 'on a lake island in the North of Ireland which is shaped like an anvil'[533] seems to be the basis of the series of 'Anvil Rock' paintings completed in the mid-1960s. The sculptural effect of the rock is replicated within the painting, with the scale given to its shape taking a microcosmic image representing the landscape and expanding it to suggest the vastness of the place it came from. The piercing of the form recalls the work of Henry Moore, one of Middleton's longstanding heroes. The control within his process that the artist enjoys, as Jamison suggested, is demonstrated here in an intellectual as well as a visual abstraction of a place, so that the image is able to absorb memories and thoughts of an experience of this as much as responding to it in an immediate, instinctive manner.

A similar manner of working is evident in another of the extended series of works titled 'K at the Piano' that dominated Middleton's painting in the late 1950s and 1960s. Having hardly painted his wife throughout the first fifteen years of their relationship, she was now referred to consistently in these paintings. Jane Middleton remarked that, although he and Kathleen had met because her first husband had asked him to paint her portrait, 'he never ever painted a portrait of (Kathleen, but)…she was the model for most of his female figure paintings. But not in the sense of portraits.'[534] In these paintings it appears to have been the formal arrangement of shapes that evolved from the profile of a figure seated at an upright piano that engaged Middleton's attention, and in particular the opportunities it gave him to explore a process of abstraction

[533] Gallagher, Raymond, 'Stimulating Middleton Exhibition', *The Irish Press*, 2 December 1968
[534] Jane Middleton Giddens, Interview with the author, 2 September 2016

within a set arrangement.[535] While this is a particularly intimate domestic scene, as Kathleen Middleton was a keen pianist, the works are again more concerned with Jamison's 'rational of organisation and balance'.

A series of drawings reveals the simplification of forms from a recognisable treatment of his wife at the piano through a concentration on the forms of both to a single integrated image that is very much related to Middleton's identification of the female form and the landscape. This identification remains central to Middleton's landscape painting throughout the 1960s; where it had been at the heart of his 1940s and 1950s landscapes in a primarily symbolic manner, it became much more a matter of formal alignment in the 1960s. As with the series 'K at the Piano', Middleton sought the integrated image that would become iconographically ambiguous but would convey the symbolic significance of both elements within it.

It is instructive to compare Middleton's handling of this relationship of female form to landscape, which he himself described as the enduring connection between his work and its most important symbol.

> What gives my work constancy is the continuity of the female archetype, no matter how many the disguises, the mother figure, the mother and child, the reclining figure, the single tree against the hill…The archetype is basically a symbol. It is a link between what is articulate and what is inarticulate, a link between what is known and what is unknown.'[536]

Girl in a Trance, 1943, arranges the forms of the figure in a series of curves that continue the rhythms of the trees and hills around her with a crowning arc of flowers around her hair, but while she is compositionally integrated within the landscape she retains her own identity and sets the mood of the painting, while the title also allows her this separateness from her environment. Equally in a slightly later painting, *East*

[535] The artist John Breakey, a friend of Colin Middleton's and a keen pianist, was also drawn and painted by him while playing the piano at the Middleton's house, suggesting that the stimulus for these paintings was more the formal arrangement of shapes than the identity of then sitter (John Breakey, Interview with the author, 5 April 2018)

[536] 'Talking to Colin Middleton: Interview by Michael Longley', *Irish Times*, 7 April 1967

Wind, from early 1948, the two female figures take on the attributes of the natural forces within the painting as well as expressing their symbolic roles.

The female figure becomes even more strongly a focus for the meaning and mood of the place, rather than becoming abstracted within the same visual language, in the expressionist paintings of the period between 1948 and 1958. *Hallowe'en*, of 1950/51, embodies within the archetypal female figure of the period both the sense of loss and danger within the fishing community within which Middleton lived and their superstitions and traditions, as well as broader themes of suffering and loss conveyed through the single figure. In *Manna* the female figure is more comforting, powerful and immoveable, and also more strongly defined than the man she is supporting. The female archetype both expresses the suffering of the individual and also the regenerative and redemptive potential of the natural world, often in a Christian or supernatural context.

In the 1960s the female form is still an expressive symbolic vehicle but Middleton aligns it much more closely with his formal analysis of the landscape. *Reclining Figure, Bearnagh III*, 1967, offers one of the closest alignments of the landscape and the female figure. The prepared surface imbues a rock-like texture to what might be a series of boulders or a line of mountains across a landscape. Incisions suggest identifiable aspects of the female form, with its arms introducing a more lyrical element. This formal synthesis creates ambiguity within which elements of the image cannot be defined or separated with accuracy, therefore allowing it to take on greater symbolic power as a single entity and to unite meanings brought to it by both landscape and figure.

The consistency of ambition within Middleton's work is remarkable. The draft of a note on his paintings by Kate, probably written around in the mid-1960s suggests that the 'discerning critic will note the affinities between these and the earliest work'.[537] He wrote about his use of the symbol in 1934 and 1943, and in the latter essay explained that he sought a union 'of self to surroundings', a harmony and a 'making whole'. Works such as this demonstrate the artist continuing to address this aim.

[537] Undated, unpublished note by Kathleen Middleton, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

The integration between the symbol and the subject is a consistent preoccupation, but the ongoing search for integration within the artist's own creative personality remains a powerful force behind the changes of style within his work, although it is a representation of two enduring concerns that drive his work rather than demonstrating any uncertainty or lack of direction. The increasing formal integration between the twin archetypes of landscape and the female form appears to have been influenced by the return to a style which is shaped to some degree by Middleton's re-engagement with elements of design within his painting as well as the emphasis shifting from content to form. It is the same connection that Kathleen had drawn between the influence of architecture and 'Middleton's continuing preoccupation with landscape.'

5.4

In the 1960s and on into the 1970s Middleton's exhibitions become increasingly independent, although connected, explorations of symbolic and formal ideas. In 1962, the year after he was appointed Head of Art at Friends School Lisburn (which still retained its traditional Quaker ethos and where his distinctive profile attracted the nickname 'Caesar')[538] Middleton agreed to hold a partial retrospective with the Magee Gallery, recently re-modelled by the architect Robert McKinstry. Remarkably for a successful and prolific artist of 52, this was his first solo exhibition with a commercial gallery in Belfast, having only previously shown in his native city at the Museum or with CEMA.

It is clear how the changes that occurred in Middleton's work across a number of years could have become confusing to the public in this exhibition, as it included a great range of works that represented various stages of his development, from precise early surreal works to multi-figure expressionist compositions, as well as landscapes from

[538] Information from Dr Jackie Reilly, unrecorded conversation with the author, 20th June 2018

the early 1940s through to the 1950s; even the most recent work included, from the early 1960s, demonstrates some softening of the more rigorously abstracted painting at the beginning of the decade.

It is likely that this varied selection was driven by practical thoughts of trying to sell older work that remained in the studio and possibly also by thoughts of what he had called in 1947 'admirers of a particular Middleton phaze (sic)'.[539] Middleton still appears to have seen his future as exhibiting in England; a letter was sent by Alan White at the Magee Gallery to a number of galleries in London to see if they would take work, including to the Tooth Gallery. Peter Cochrane, who had been involved with Middleton's exhibitions there ten years earlier, replied that 'I remember his work well and am a great admirer of his painting…',[540] but that other commitments meant they could not give him an exhibition.

It must have been to Middleton's great chagrin that the painter Bryan Senior, then working at Crane Kalman, replied to White to suggest he contact Waddington as 'they originate from Dublin'. There is a note from Gallery Seventy in London, in October 1963, acknowledging the receipt of paintings in good order, but no record of any exhibition or sales, or of any more contact with them. Middleton seems to have entered the 1963 John Moores Painting Prize, but after this year it appears that he abandoned these ambitions and concentrated on exhibiting in Belfast and Dublin.

Another letter to Alan White, in response to his sending a number of works for the consideration of the Ulster Museum, perhaps demonstrates a very different relationship with the artist now that John Hewitt was no longer there, although its tone is remarkable, stating that the Trustees 'were not able to purchase any of works, in view of the fact that we already possess four pictures by this artist, two of which are better than any submitted by you'.[541] They do not specify which two they considered superior.

---

[539] Letter from Colin Middleton to John Hewitt, 5-13 October 1947, John and Roberta Hewitt Archive, PRONI, D3838/7/23/21

[540] Letter from J.P. Cochrane to Alan White, 20 September 1962, Private Collection

[541] Letter from Director of the Ulster Museum to Messrs. John Magee Ltd., 13 August 1962, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI

The importance of different landscapes for Middleton and the very specificity of his response to them is the defining feature of the exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s. I have discussed the biographical elements that were so crucial in the transformation in his work in the late 1950s, but the symbiotic relationship with the landscape around him that we can trace from Belfast, Ringneill and Ballyhalbert to Ardglass and North Down, via Thelnetham, is clearly crucial in defining the very different mood of this period and also the manner of working that was related to it.

> The limestone and basalt of County Antrim inspired a more astringent vision and, so far as I can judge, had a more lasting influence on his work than any other landscape. The spaciousness of the plateaux and the reach of the boglands gave Middleton a predilection for flat plains stretching to far horizons…[542]

The compositional arrangement that slowly took shape in the late 1950s through more traditional paintings such as *Rain: Bush Valley* took a more simplified and abstracted form in the *Sundown, Carnalridge* series and informed the construction of Middleton's late landscapes. The 1960s and the early 1970s saw Middleton become known as a landscape painter more widely than at any other time in his career, and in many ways it was in this that he played the strongest local role, both in renewing a modern landscape tradition that had not changed significantly since Craig and McKelvey, and also in ensuring that his influence remained strong in the next generation of artists.

The evolution of this manner of approaching the landscape is in close alignment with the reawakening of Middleton's interest in design. He sets in place a minimal formal arrangement within which subtle additions can play a significant role. In preparation for these works Middleton did make small sketches and colour notes directly from the landscape but he appears to have relied as much on memory and also on a very particular emotional and intellectual familiarity with a place with which he sensed a connection.

> You've got to go to a place until it does something to you. Or, rather, you gravitate – when you get there you know you belong – it gets at you, it eats

[542] Longley, Michael, 'Colin Middleton', *Intraspect*, No.1, December 1975, pp.21-22

> you…Once you get there you know you're kith and kin. The stones start to talk.[543]

It is a highly internalised experience but arguably a process that is less about elucidating the identity of the artist than that of the particular place. It is also remarkably close to John Hewitt's concept of regionalism. Driven as they are by a set of named landscapes, around the Mournes, Lough Erne, Donegal and the North Coast, there is something strongly independent in Middleton's landscapes of this period. While one can see some influence of Pasmore or Ben Nicholson in the early stages of this process, by the end of the 1970s it has emerged into a style evolved through the intellectual processes of a highly trained artist rather than through his relationship with Irish or international modernism.

Despite his teaching commitments the 1960s was a remarkably productive decade for Middleton and also a period during which he re-established his reputation as arguably the leading contemporary artist working in Ireland. The Irish Times critic recalled in a review of his 1968 exhibition at the Ritchie Hendriks Gallery that 'In the early and middle fifties he was widely felt to be the leading artist in the country after Jack Yeats' and continued that 'it is hard to resist the conclusion that Middleton is now the finest painter in Ireland, North and South'[544] while, two years later, the same newspaper noted his wider popular recognition.

> Middleton is rapidly reaching the stage where he can sell any picture he produces in a short space of time. It is gratifying to see that he is being honoured this year up North by a retrospective exhibition and one hopes the show will come down here. No painter living in Ireland deserves it more.[545]

The *Belfast Telegraph* critic claimed that he also had 'the rare asset amongst contemporary painters of being understood outside the profession.'[546] To some extent the consistent and subtle landscapes of this decade had established a certain broad popularity for Middleton and, for some, these had achieved an integration of the

---

[543] 'Interview with Colin Middleton', Michael Longley
[544] *Irish Times*, 2 December 1968
[545] *Irish Times*, 10 January 1970
[546] Kinnen, Derek, 'Art', *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 October 1971

expressionist period with the different mood of the works on either side of it, a 'rapprochement between what have often seemed to be incompatible sides of his personality – the austere geometry of his abstract, or semi-abstract works, and the freer, almost expressionistic style of many of the small pictures he paints with such brio and love.'[547]

These landscapes, painted on boards of remarkably wide-ranging dimensions, from 6 inches square to 48 inches square, are significant within Middleton's career and, as well as the stylistic development they marked, they also often express a personal reflection on place (which remained central to his art even when it became less clearly associated with his native landscape) but they remain slightly separate from the continuing development that was to reach a new stage in the 1970s.

5.5

In 1970 Middleton retired from teaching to paint full-time again, more than twenty years after Victor Waddington had first provided the same opportunity. This came about thanks to a number of factors. As the Irish Times critic had noted in 1970 his paintings were selling well and he was now represented by the Tom Caldwell Gallery in Belfast as well as by David Hendriks in Dublin (he also sold occasional works through the Bell Gallery, with whom he had held an exhibition of drawings in 1965, although this was often to pay framing bills that had built up with them), while another dealer in Belfast, George McClelland, acquired from him in the early 1970s a large number of unsold canvases that included many from the late 1930s and early 1940s, as well as some more recent works. Catherine Marshall noted that they were 'carefully selected from the three foot high pile of unsold work stretching back to the 1930s on the studio floor'.[548]

[547] *Irish Times*, 2 December 1968
[548] Marshall, Catherine, *Colin Middleton: Paintings and Drawings from the McClelland Collection*, Irish Museum of Modern Art

He was also awarded a subsistence bursary by the Arts Council in 1971, the benefits of which were listed by Kathleen in a letter to Brian Ferran written in place of the report requested from the artist.

> I think you could inform your committee that Colin continued to paint; that, relieved of the necessity to teach, he painted twice as happily. He exhibited at the Caldwell Gallery; executed, if that is the word, a mural for the Ulster '71 Exhibition; was able to rent a studio in Donegal where he painted the most wonderful watercolours and caught the most wonderful trout…[549]

Derek Kinnen noted in the *Belfast Telegraph* that autumn that the Arts Council grant had enabled Middleton to give up teaching and to have 'entered upon the most ambitious project of his life'.[550] It is interesting that Kinnen suggests that to 'some extent this then switches a brighter spotlight on his work', which might indicate why Middleton embarked on such an ambitious series of works which, in certain ways, seem to have deliberately addressed his career and his identity as an artist within his work.

If Middleton had settled into a groove within Northern Ireland, even becoming, as John Hewitt described him, 'something of an unlikely establishment figure'[551] with the award of an MBE and an honorary Doctorate from Queen's University, the early 1970s were the time at which this changed dramatically and, much as had occurred in 1947, when he had last travelled outside Northern Ireland for a lengthy period of time, it had a profound impact on his work. The effect of travel on Middleton's painting had always been powerfully stimulating. A rare holiday abroad in 1966 had been taken, after much family discussion, to Belgium, where Colin had stayed with his father almost forty years earlier, and this had resulted in a highly architectural and abstracted series of paintings. Kathleen wrote in the foreword to an exhibition that 'the Gothic brick churches, particularly those of Brugge, and the pavement cafés, were the artist's main inspiration'. One of Kathleen's daughters with Bruce Barr, Alison, had moved to Australia in the early 1970s and Colin and Kathleen's youngest child, Jane, also married and settled in Barcelona around the same time.

---

[549] Letter from Kathleen Middleton to Brian Ferran, 30 June 1972, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[550] Kinnen, Derek, 'Art', *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 October 1971
[551] Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton retrospective show', *Irish Times*, 21 January 1976

In June 1972 Colin and Kathleen left Belfast on a round the world trip by boat that was to last until November. An article by Elgy Gillespie for the Irish Times, as part of a memorably titled 'Embattled Arts' series, was based on an interview conducted in Belfast the previous month and revealed the impact of the Troubles on Middleton and on Belfast, although Kathleen did write to the newspaper to complain about the accuracy of its depiction of the artist. He had apparently commented to Gillespie on 'the feeling of intimidation hanging in the air' and that 'all this is bad for art; it uses up nervous energy that should be going on painting',[552] as well as the loss of the mood and individuality that he had always recognised in Belfast. It is little wonder that this journey had such a profound impact on his work, visiting South America and then staying for two months with Alison in Rossmoyne, Perth, where Middleton set up a studio and began to make a series of small works.

Shortly after their return to Northern Ireland, Colin and Kate moved back to Bangor, where they overlooked the sea at 6 Victoria Road. Middleton was to spend the rest of his life here. The Australian Watercolours were exhibited in 1973 at the McClelland Galleries and it became one of Middleton's most popular and successful exhibitions. Although McClelland's presence in Belfast lasted only a few years he held two exhibitions of Middleton's work, and correspondence with David Hendriks reveals the problems that exhibiting with Tom Caldwell, Hendriks and now McClelland had created. It was perhaps the legacy of his experiences with Victor Waddington that made Middleton reluctant to commit to a single dealer, preferring to retain a position of control himself.

Mike Catto recalled Middleton's enthusiasm for Australia and his excitement at its effect on his art, particularly in his treatment of light and colour.[553] The influence of the Aboriginal art he had seen while there is demonstrated in these works in the application of flat marks in gouache that are set against the blank sheet. The purity and intensity of colour sets these apart from the work he had made in Ulster over the last

[552] Gillespie, Elgy, 'Embattled Arts 2 - What's the point of painting?', *Irish Times*, 11 May 1972
[553] Catto, Mike, unpublished notes given to the author, 2016

decade and a half as well as marking out new territory that Middleton was to explore further after a first journey to Barcelona in 1974 to visit Jane.

His ability to assess and memorise a new landscape with extraordinary speed and accuracy allowed him to absorb places and motifs in Spain that were to remain significant in his work for a number of years.

> …he had an absolutely incredible visual memory, it was absolutely incredible. One very small example is one small square landscape that he gave to me after his first air trip to Spain and we picked him up at Barcelona airport on the outskirts of Barcelona and we drove him along the little dual carriageway back into Barcelona, and that was in a moving car, 25 minutes, and he painted the hills around Barcelona. Another small example is a beautiful pencil drawing…of the sacred mountain, Montserrat. We took him there for a day visit, absolutely beautiful, detailed pencil drawing of the rock formations turned into a Holy Trinity. That was just one short day visit. And he didn't do any drawing while he was there.[554]

Middleton's exhibitions in the mid-1970s chronicle his travels and a direct and indirect response to them. The Wilderness Series is at the heart of his work in the 1970s and became the basis of several exhibitions, but beyond this it also acts as the last and the most significant turn in the path through five decades of painting shaped by the dialectic that had been set up between Middleton as a painter and as a designer.

The idea of the wilderness had appeared in Middleton's work decades earlier. *Flower in the Wilderness* was one of the series of Ringneill paintings from 1944, the year when he and Kathleen had become a couple. Before that, Middleton's 1943 solo exhibition had included *Wilderness. Mother and Child: No.3*, while a number of the works of this period, such as *Grey Silence* could be interpreted as the visual evocation of the wilderness itself. Within these early works the wilderness seems to represent a personal journey through suffering to recovery and regeneration, in a parallel manner to the journey illustrated in the 1943 exhibition. The isolation and pain Middleton had experienced after the loss of his first wife and, apparently, the loss of their unborn

[554] Jane Middleton Giddens, interview with the author, 2 September 2016

child, seems to be met with peace and healing in the image of a flower growing once again in the wilderness.

The artist's own analysis of the Wilderness series and its sources provides another indication of the continuity of intention and ambition in his work across decades. One might assume that the idea of the Wilderness as a cohesive theme for a large group of works would have been inspired by the vast spaces of the oceans he crossed in 1972, and of the sight of places like Tierra del Fuego, but Middleton actually located the series locally as well as more exotically as relating to 'Fermanagh / Southern hemisphere / Barcelona'[555] and states that the word was used in the first painting of the series and continued from there. The genesis of these series of paintings can first be seen in 1971, in four 'classical studies' exhibited in an exhibition at the Tom Caldwell Gallery which Derek Kinnen described as a 'slightly new departure for him' and perceptively noted that the 'ideas implied within them he has not yet fully resolved',[556] for which reason these works were not for sale as they were intended to form part of a group.

There are areas of notable consistency between the handwritten note about the Wilderness series that dates from around 1973 or 1974 and the introduction to Middleton's 1943 exhibition. In the latter he wrote, 'To-day, as never more urgently in the known past, humanity is faced with the problem of survival'. In addition, 'Survival implies…The universal, physical aspect of the survival of the species…The universal, or impersonal, spiritual aspect of everlasting life'[557], which bears comparison to the later analysis of the idea of the wilderness as symbol.

> Acknowledging that the salvation of this planet depends on the maintaining of the old and the making of new wildernesses.[558]

While Middleton does not appear to have used the same Biblical references in titles or in the imagery of paintings that were so comparatively common in his paintings of the late 1940s and early 1950s, it is notable that he still places his own spiritual struggles as an artist within this context.

---

[555] Middleton, Colin, unpublished handwritten note, Private Collection
[556] Kinnen, Derek, 'Art', *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 October 1971
[557] Middleton, Colin, 'Note on One Man Exhibiton', Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, 1943
[558] Colin Middleton, unpublished note

> Throughout, this term is used in its Biblical sense – a place to which the soul withdraws from the immediate urgency of clocks and calendars to rediscover the continuum of survival which is impersonal and without price. [559]

It appears that he was conscious that, despite this explanation, there was still some misunderstanding of his use of the word.

> People misunderstood me about this word wilderness, very much so because they assume that I speak of a wilderness…some derelict place or something like that, when my wildernesses are…the biblical ones if you like, where you go into the wilderness and you do your 40 days and 40 nights and come out refreshed, this sort of thing. It's a totally different connotation altogether when I use wilderness, it's a place that, if you like, that you retreat to…discover the peace and the quiet…it's not a dereliction or anything like that, it's a place to go to get refreshed.[560]

The sense in which Middleton sees part of the artist's role as transcending the momentary to reach something more enduring is also reflected in his attitude at this time towards recent artistic trends. Mike Catto noted that he did not like pop or the new realism,[561] and in a poem Middleton states 'Op, pop, hard edge and abstraction / limit our horizons'.[562]

The Wilderness Series not only looks back to ideas Middleton had explored in earlier decades, it also re-introduces visual motifs and technical matters that had previously engaged him and even raises questions over his own self-defined identity as an artist. Both in this note and in the revised and reduced introduction in the catalogue when the first group of these works was exhibited at the Tom Caldwell Gallery as 'Wilderness Series – Southern Hemisphere and Barcelona', Middleton wrote of himself as the 'only Surrealist working in Ireland' in the 1930s',[563] despite having described 'Surrealist' in

[559] Ibid.
[560] Colin Middleton, unpublished interview with Eamonn Mallie, 1983
[561] Catto, Mike, unpublished notes given to the author, 2016
[562] Colin Middleton, 'Climbing', unpublished poem, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[563] In the draft, this is 'the only committed Surrealist working in Ireland'.

1950 as 'a term which I have consistently repudiated since the first time it was applied'.[564] Even in the late 1970s he still needed to qualify this allegiance.

> Regarding the term 'Surrealist' I feel it should be more strictly applied to the Breton period (between the end of World War I and World War II) with its professed allegiance to Marx, and to Freud in particular. Perhaps we could now consider the term 'Superrealism', coined and rejected by Herbert Read, to include such kindred spirits as Bosch, Blake and others, who preceeded (sic) the Surrealist movement, and those who have stemmed from it.[565]

There remains ambivalence about describing this work as surrealist. In January 1973 he connected this resurgence of a surrealist element within his work with the impact of the Troubles and, in retrospect, with the Blitz, although undeniably many of his most overtly typical surrealist works pre-date 1941.

> The tension, the repressed anxiety…all the things that build up and push in on the emotional side…I find that it builds up, it's reactivated the old surrealist bug…[566]

Middleton's increasing reservations about the use of the term might in part be due to his disappointment at visiting the Dali Museum on a trip to Spain, which perhaps made this allegiance seem more problematic. In the catalogue note he suggested 'Neo-Realist' might be more appropriate for these paintings, 'if you want labels', while in the earlier version of the text he acknowledged cautiously that 'This body of work may still be broadly catalogued as Surrealist'. In both notes he implied that as World War Two had proven 'the prophetic significance of the original Surrealist Movement' the movement as it was understood in the 1920s and 1930s was not the context in which his 1970s paintings should be approached.

His reference to 'Super-Realism' recalls Herbert Read and the intellectual context of the 1930s, while the attempt to connect what he describes as the 'essential surrealist urge' with the distinctly Northern European tradition of Flanders and North Germany,

---

[564] Letter from Colin Middleton to Victor Waddington, 6 March 1950, Private Collection
[565] Letter from Colin Middleton to Julian Watson, 14 August 1978, Colin Middleton Archive, NMNI
[566] Cooke, Harriet, 'Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 25 January 1973

with which he had always felt a personal and artistic connection, also supports the idea that Middleton was considering these works as closely related to his own earlier work. It is significant that the qualities that had re-emerged in Middleton's work in the 1960s, those often associated with design, appear in even more refined and controlled form in the Wilderness Series. The emphasis in his explanations of the significance of realism within Surrealism justifies the precision of his depiction of elements from the physical world, but the manner in which these paintings look back to Middleton's life as a linen designer marks the most complete integration of this aspect of his creative personality within his art.

The striking title of the first exhibition at Tom Caldwell's of the 'Wilderness Series: Northern Hemisphere and Barcelona' immediately establishes one derivation of much of the work: Middleton's travels of 1972/3 and 1974. But as much as locating specific geographical inspirations this title evokes a sense of otherness and strangeness, of a journey that is imaginative, psychological or symbolic as well as physical. This sense of dislocation, or perhaps an embrace of strangeness, is reinforced by Jane Middleton's recollection of her father describing an unexpected influence on some of the Wilderness paintings, that he 'had a thing about advertising'.

> …some of the paintings that he did from the Spanish period, those paintings that he did of those ladies trailing along the train of carpet behind them, he said that that idea had come from the big advertising hoardings that there are in the middle of a field, or on the top of a mountain…the whole futility of them, it was a statement of how ludicrous the whole world is.[567]

Middleton himself acknowledged that 'putting carpet all over the desert' was 'a bit of advertising' and the paintings had a 'certain element of social comment in them'.[568] The idea of advertising imagery as realism that was presenting a separate reality to a lived experience of the world while mimicking and using tools of the material world, might perhaps have encouraged Middleton to consider those descriptions of surrealist and neo-realist. It is certainly an indication of the extent to which he absorbed and

[567] Interview with Jane Middleton Giddens
[568] Colin Middleton, unpublished interview with Eamonn Mallie, 1983

integrated so many visual experiences of travel. The Wilderness Series indicates the profound impact that travel had on Middleton, an artist who responded so powerfully to outside stimuli that the same landscape could remain complex and inspiring for many years, but who also required a definite personal connection with that particular place.

If one were to examine the thirty-one paintings included in this exhibition as a record of his journeys it is wide-ranging but sporadic and incomplete. Paintings are related to Fremantle, Sitges, Barcelona, Tierro del Fuego, but only in relation to other ideas or moods, rather than in any apparently geographical or descriptive manner. The broader, more philosophical and less geographical idea of the Wilderness is most prevalent, at times relating to a bewildering array of unconnected people, while there are other titles which do not necessarily seem to belong within the theme.

The exhibition, and the Wilderness Series, arguably makes most sense if it is viewed as an interior journey that is sparked off by a physical journey, with which it then runs in parallel. Each painting is a part of the journey the artist takes through a personal wilderness; the imagery in these works brings together elements of the internal and the external, of past and present experience, and places them in a series of loosely connected landscapes, whose vast, often empty spaces are clearly linked to the artist's recollections of weeks spent on an ocean liner or in the Australian desert.

The surprising pantheon of historical figures to whom Middleton pays tribute has about it something flippant, but equally each one could be interpreted as an indication of some aspect of Middleton's own life or background. Hortense Fiquet, Cézanne's mistress and then wife, might refer to his own wife, Kathleen, who had shared similar struggles through her unwavering dedication to an artist. Banjo Patterson recalls the time he spent in Australia and the Bush culture that interested him, while Nancy Blair is perhaps another reference to his travels, invoking a sea shanty in which a sailor regrets leaving behind 'Miss Nancy Blair' before setting sail. Middleton's attachment to Belgium, one of the few countries to which he had travelled outside Ireland before the 1970s, and which had greatly influenced his work, is noted in the mention of the

cyclist Eddy Merckx.[569] Salvador Allende probably re-states Middleton's socialism and the political involvement of the earlier part of his life, while Kirsten Flagstad and Fiorenza Cossotto, very different types of soprano, denote Middleton's love of music, but possibly also the dialectic of two different artistic voices, the northern and southern European.

One might read this listing of names as Middleton identifying and setting out the *dramatis personae* within this series, all of whom are in some ways a part of the artist's identity. The theatricality of this premise is matched by the strange stage sets of the paintings. Despite the far-flung influences on these works, there also appear to be specifically local references. The row of houses along the beach front in *Measuring the Wind* is reminiscent of Ballyholme, where the Middletons had first settled in Bangor in 1953, while the steeply positioned Victorian house in *The Wilderness of Kirsten Flagstad* might seem familiar to many who know the town, where many similar houses occupy equally commanding positions on hills that slope up away from the sea.

The Wilderness Series also recalls the barren landscapes of Middleton's earlier surrealist paintings, such as *The Dark Tower* or *The Yellow Door* (a number of which also suggested local landmarks and points of reference), harking back to his own early work as an artist and suggesting the self-referential nature of the series. Perhaps the clearest indication that these paintings represent a re-examination of Middleton's youthful creative identity, in which design played a significant role, is the frequent use of rolls of patterned fabric that recur in the Wilderness paintings until around 1976.

These are not only a part of the clothing worn by the tiny mannequins in *Metro: St George's Day, Barcelona* or *The Queen of Spain's Daughter*, they almost seem to be an intrinsic part of their physical being within the logic of the world Middleton paints. In *Measuring the Sky* passages describing fabric become more physically substantial within the work than any other aspect of it, and it becomes a point of connection between the landscape and the figure, asserting its significance.

[569] The Middletons never owned a car and cycled extensively. Kathleen's father had also been an enthusiastic cyclist.

On one level this might also be a reference to the use of patterned fabric in an abstract and symbolic role in some paintings from the early 1940s, such as *The Return* and *The Discovery*, through to works of the 1960s, such as *Seated Woman* (1964). This might be connected to expressionist paintings such as *Gypsy, Ardglass* (1954), although the sense of pattern is distorted and less a significant element within the work. But it also plays the same role as it did in these paintings, of acting as an acknowledgement of this element of damask design within Middleton's deepest creative instincts and methods.

5.6

An even more complete synthesis of damask design and painting was evolved within the more tightly focussed series of paintings that followed. The Westerness Series was painted in 1974-5, again on the same 24 x 24 inches boards as the Wilderness Series. Each of these groups is more individual and separate than the closeness of their names suggests.

While Middleton had used patterned fabric in rolls and on clothing in the Wilderness Series, in the Westerness paintings the suggestion of material is more completely integrated within the painting. Through skilful use of prepared boards and varnishes and even some development of decalcomania, a technique closely associated with surrealists such as Max Ernst, Middleton created passages of textured pattern that, rather than defining separate aspects of the image, actually cross from one to the other, emphasising the symbolic connections that were of enduring importance for Middleton. If he had struggled previously to find compatibility between painting and design then the Westerness Series offers a vision of how they can be integrated in the most complete and interdependent manner.

This was apparent to John Hewitt, almost certainly the writer most conscious of the significance of design for Middleton, writing about the Westerness Series as it was evolving.

> In the series of as yet untitled paintings which continue the Wilderness theme, the veils and gauzes of the still capes and panoplies of the rather monolithic figures set in arid landscapes are rendered with amazing delicacy, looking almost like collages of fine muslin meticulously laid on the square board.[570]

In paintings such as 'Sleeping Beauty' Middleton has found a manner of creating a world that suggests the physical and tactile but remains ultimately immaterial. These are paintings about metamorphosis rather than surrealist works and suggest a mystical synchronicity within the natural world, which again makes a clear connection with many of the works in Middleton's first exhibition, from those dealing with the Cinderella myth and *The Snow Queen* to *The Oracle* or *The Poet's Garden.*

The long process of integration that had been at the centre of Middleton's work since at least the late 1930s was arguably achieved in this series of works through what he called 'the transmutation of symbols', bringing together different, even opposing ideas or forces, through the symbol that they could share, and pushing symbols into an unfamiliar context to make their own meaning broader or more ambiguous.

> Transmutation and Metamorphosis are the stuff of all poetry.[571]

It is interesting to compare his note to Julian Watson on the painting *Dream of the Moth* with Middleton's note for the 1943 exhibition.

> I use the word Transmutation in an hermetic sense, which gives an inward or psychological emphasis to the development and refinement of a particular symbol or cluster of symbols.[572]
>
> The significance of any symbol is infinite; depending entirely on degree of perception and awareness…The symbol remains constant: its significance is relative and infinite.[573]

This painting demonstrates Middleton's slow process as an artist in terms of the refinement and bringing together of ideas and images, perhaps his own

---

[570] Hewitt, *Colin Middleton*, p.52
[571] Middleton to Watson, 14 August 1978
[572] Ibid.
[573] 'Note for One-Man Exhibition', 1943

metamorphosis. The linden leaf that inspired him sat in his studio until he had absorbed intrinsic formal and imaginative elements. It is then brought together with the female image (here in a form that is connected as deeply with his paintings of the early 1940s as of the mid-1970s) to crystallise the woman as a mysterious but physically essential part of the natural world and its cycles of rebirth, to connect his paintings of the landscape with those of the figure in an almost synonymous way, and to consider within the single image the two contradictory aspects of his creative life, with all their own implications, the designer of damask and the painter of the quiet and enduring landscape. Human creativity, the artist's or designer's response to his environment, and the innate beauty of the natural world are crucially intertwined for Middleton.

The Westerness Series is arguably the most complete return to the symbolism of the early work. The female archetype is strongly connected with the landscape in visual terms but remains a definite and separate presence with an apparent narrative role within many of the paintings. There is a multi-faceted spiritual aspect to these figures, with suggestions of the physically elusive and inaccessible but spiritually present and powerful Virgin of Montserrat alongside an evocative wild Joycean freedom.

The image of the bird that had remained one of Middleton's most recurrent images throughout the various stages of his career until the Wilderness paintings, is present in many of these paintings. Its kinship with the female figure within his work runs from the wartime period, from *The Sister Voice* or *A Tear, A Cloud, A Fountain* through *Girl with Owl* in the 1950s and the highly abstracted 1960s series of women with birds up to works such as *Linnet* in the 1970s, but it is also intriguing to look at the implied association of the meaning of the bird symbol with the female archetype even when it is not actually present, such as *If I Were A Blackbird* or *The Swallow's Nest, Montserrat IV*. Middleton rarely spoke of this image, although it seems to be the single most enduring symbol in his work, apart from the female figure. It is often used almost as a familiar to the female archetype, suggesting a spiritual dimension that accompanies the physical human presence, without the ties, bonds and practical limitations of the latter.

The sense of myth that in the earlier paintings is usually constructed within a Christian context here takes on a more general mood of mysticism that relates to cultural

tradition and memory. In late 1977 Middleton exhibited 21 paintings at the Tom Caldwell Galleries in Belfast, bringing together some new works with examples from the Westerness Series and some recent paintings that seem to extend the Wilderness Series, under the title of 'Transmutations, Metamorphoses, Visitations', recalling his description in 1943 of the symbol within his painting as having infinite meaning and transformative power that depended entirely on the viewer's 'degree of perception and awareness'.[574]

In the same way, the symbolic quality of places is central to understanding Middleton's later work. For example, the idea of Spain as an actual and an imagined place for Middleton, where memory and recent experience became interlinked in the imagery of his painting, ultimately a place in which his past and present coalesced, is perhaps unsurprising. Both Dali and Miro were key early influences for him, however dispirited he later felt by Dali, while some of his most powerful early paintings were made in response to the Spanish Civil War. Spain appears to have become the site of much of the integration that we see in Middleton's work in the mid-1970s.

Barcelona remained the inspiration for many of Middleton's best paintings from the last five years of his life, mostly colourful, wittily simplified images that demonstrate the pleasure he found in the time he spent there. Pattern and decoration are central to these and in a painting such as *El Nene* Middleton's skill at using pattern to integrate the image with the flat surface becomes a deceptively simple device to assert a key element of the modernist approach to the two dimensionality of the painted surface. Beyond using pattern to identify fabric and clothing within the image, describing the entire figure in this way as well as creating a shallow illusory space, suggestions of warp and weft and flat colour seem to question the distance between a painting and designed fabric.

It represents an extraordinary alignment of the dialectical discourse that had shaped Middleton's art and, in many ways, also affected his life. In 1932 he had sacrificed the opportunity to study in London at the Slade School, with all the additional opportunities that might have brought, to take on his father's role in Page and

[574] Note for One-Man Exhibition', 1943

Middleton; in 1947 he had abandoned his life in Belfast to work on Middleton Murry's farming commune in England in an attempt to create a new life away from damask designing, despite the clear pride he found in his skill and achievements in this work. In the mid-1950s, when he had tried to re-introduce himself as a designer in Belfast, he had found that the linen industry was struggling and that his training and experience were no longer necessary. His art, which until then he had apparently tried to retain as a separate part of his creative identity, had also become the means for expressing his vision as a designer, and ultimately this forced an integration between the two identities that he had previously been unable or unwilling to achieve.

5.7

The largest and most significant exhibition of Middleton's career took place in 1976, organised by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and An Chomhairle Ealaion (The Arts Council of Ireland). The one hundred and ninety paintings covered the years from 1940 to 1975, on loan from private and corporate collectors, museums and the artist himself. Ninety-six drawings were also shown, described as the 'Kate Middleton Loan Collection', which included some rare early works from the 1930s incorporating collage and photographic elements.

Surviving handwritten lists indicate that Middleton was very involved with the selection of works for the exhibition, with crossed-out titles perhaps due to unavailability or a change of mind as to what would represent him best.[575] More than ten paintings from the Wilderness Series were included as well as a similar number of the Australian watercolours. The inclusion of forty-five paintings in the last section, which only covered the years 1972-5, as opposed to the thirteen selected to cover 1955-61, or the twelve that covered the previous five years, reinforces the comment, with which

[575] It is striking that the period during which Middleton exhibited with Victor Waddington is very under-represented in this exhibition, although Waddington himself is mentioned. Very few of the major works from these years were included. This might indicate a change of opinion about their significance in the context of his career, or it is possible that the logistics of locating and borrowing certain works might have necessitated contact with Waddington.

presumably Middleton did not argue, in the short introduction to this last section of the exhibition catalogue that 'At the age of 66 on 29th January 1976, Colin Middleton is at the peak of his painting career'.[576]

Middleton's inventiveness and productivity at this time is certainly remarkable. He had achieved a level of recognition and success that was noted by Brian Ferran in his introduction to this exhibition.

> Colin Middleton is now probably the best known and most appreciated painter in Northern Ireland.[577]

This assessment was quoted directly in the Belfast Telegraph's review of the exhibition, the aim of which 'is not just to show again the artist known so well to the public here but also to exhibit many lesser-known aspects of his work, to illustrate the richness in variety and style'[578]. John Hewitt wrote for the Irish Times less a review of this exhibition than an analysis of Middleton's career that sets out a context in which the continuity and development of his painting was stressed. Since his 1943 exhibition Hewitt noted that Middleton has 'preferred to think of his works as groups or series, as the means of expressing the range and ramifications of his visual reactions to experience whether sensory or psychological…Middleton has extended the antennae of his attention to catch any whisper or spore that may be of use to him in articulating the complexities of his being or, as he expressed it in the note to that 1943 exhibition, 'a making whole of all that one body may contain.[579]

Hewitt makes an implicit connection between these early symbolist and surrealist paintings and the Wilderness and Westerness Series, both in process and intention. Asserting the significance of his position in the 1930s and early 1940s, Hewitt refers to Middleton as the only 'Irish-born participant' in the surrealist movement and comments that 'many of the early surrealist themes again surface in an oddly transmuted form' in the Wilderness Series.

---

[576] Ferran, Brian, 'Preface', *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976
[577] Ferran, Brian, 'Preface', *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976
[578] 'Ten Years of Colin Middleton art goes on show', *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 January 1976
[579] Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton retrospective show', *Irish Times*, 23 January 1976

The place of these later works, however, has always remained complex. Their newness ensured that they were not discussed at any length by Hewitt in his 1976 monograph or this review, or by Hewitt and Mike Catto when their surveys of art in Ulster were published in 1977, and other writers have seen it as a simple and perhaps nostalgic return to Surrealism, or one that was influenced by the Troubles. Liam Kelly considered it a more personal body of work than Middleton's earlier surrealist paintings and also wrote that 'his sheer joy in pattern is unchecked'.[580]

But the progression towards this remarkable achievement in the mid-1970s through the austere abstraction of the previous decade has not been made clear; rather it is often seen as leapfrogging back across this period and the previous twelve years of expressionist painting, in a manner that makes this separate to the production of his late work. What is remarkable is how steady and considered Middleton's progress is throughout his career, if one is aware of the crisscrossing between styles that can occur at moments of evolution, and of the length of time these definite periods of a certain style actually last.

While the introduction of rolls of patterned fabric is a striking aspect of the Wilderness paintings, one should consider whether their gestation might be demonstrated as early as 1967 in *The Road to Belmullet*, where a road traces a winding path into the distance towards a mountain, almost as if the artist is playing out a spool of thread. Middleton himself was aware of the diversity between works that were made in proximity to each other, but while acknowledging this (as in the 1943 exhibition where he made a clear distinction between those works that are part of the definite intention and ambition of his art in the eight coherent groups of Opus 1, and those which have a certain validity but remain ultimately peripheral, which he described as 'Miscellaneous') he continued to create work in defined series that were often exhibited as such.

The ambitions that Middleton set out in 1943 for this exhibition are those that sustained his art for almost the next four decades. In 1934 his brief contribution to the Ulster Unit catalogue clarified the central importance of symbols in his work. Yet these

[580] Kelly, Liam, *Colin Middleton: A Millennium Appreciation*, ed. Carlo Eastwood, Eastwood Gallery, Belfast, 2000 p.12

consistencies became increasingly clouded and confused by critical writing on Middleton's work and by broader public perception of it.

There is the undeniable complexity of his early surrealist and symbolist painting, with its overlapping of the autobiographical and the universal, the political and the philosophical; there is the vision of the post-war world expressed through the landscapes, myths and faces of County Down. By the 1960s many writers analysed Middleton in relation to other artists, usually to his diminution. John Hewitt described how in 'many notices of his previous exhibitions it has seemed almost obligatory for critics to name artists to whose work Middleton paintings seem to refer, an exercise evidencing ingenuity often of minimal relevance'.[581]

> Of course Middleton has been influenced by other artists, just as he has been influenced by the contours and colours of particular countrysides, by the moods or emotions these evoked, by the carieeons of association, a shape, a line which he has experienced may set ringing.

Increasingly there has been the issue of Middleton's development as an artist being misunderstood in the context of incorrect or ambiguous autobiographical information or a mis-dating of works. Arguably the sale of some incomplete or experimental works in the Colin Middleton Studio Sale that Christie's held in 1985, two years after her husband's death, might have exacerbated the sense of confusing diversity within his art. In many ways, however, there is remarkable alignment between the key events in Middleton's life and the development of his work. Often the obvious technical and stylistic changes that formed this development took several years to emerge in their complete form, so this overlapping can seem to suggest a lack of direction or meaning within his work.

I would suggest that this slow gestation actually demonstrates the seriousness with which Middleton approached his painting and his struggle to continually evolve an appropriate and meaningful voice as his own conception of his work progressed. At times this appears to have involved a direct reaction against elements he associated with a previous period, but it might be more accurate to see this as a process of defining

[581] Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton retrospective show', *Irish Times*, 23 January 1976

his identity against the changing backdrop of the creative role within his life and within the world around him.

As a damask designer, Colin Middleton's training, career and daily work set him on a certain path against which was set an artistic vision that was unusually complex in the nature of its ambition. Middleton wanted to create paintings that commented on the world at every level, as well as on his life within it. There is politicised anger, philosophical exploration, psychological analysis, a deep engagement with humanity through shared spiritual awareness, and the establishment of a highly original and holistic approach to the landscape of Ulster which radically altered a local tradition which had struggled to develop beyond the familiar *plein air*-influenced images of the early part of the century.

Through these works we can also trace a life, from a young man's engagement with ideas through the world around him, his response to trauma on a personal and a national level and the peace he finds in marriage, before a pattern of success and disappointment, surfacing again in recognition and appreciation, shapes changes in his work both in style and subject matter in a clear and decisive way.

Ultimately these moves back and forth between different aspects of an artistic personality which Middleton set out early in his career in all its diversity seem to represent the relationship between the designer and the artist within the single creative identity that he sought. In various aspects this is something that Middleton discussed in his own rare writing on his work, as well as in correspondence with friends and, above all, in his painting, where the traces of this dialectic and the constant working out of its duality are present across his career.

Middleton, arguably, represents the twentieth century as no other Irish artist does. He was born just at the end of its first decade and died in 1983, in its second last decade. His career straddles part of the modern era during which the practice and understanding of art was utterly altered, at the same time as the world was transformed around him. Even in Northern Ireland, separated from the mainstream effects of cultural, social and political change, Middleton absorbed and reacted quickly and powerfully to these and his response emerged in a body of paintings and drawings

that are intrinsically driven by these changes while remaining the art of a man whose deepest experience was of life in Ulster.

He was born into a dynamic industrial city and brought up as a young man to play a part in that world as a designer for the damask industry; ultimately his rejection of that, in an attempt to most directly express the experience of the twentieth century, shaped his life. Tellingly, however, this industrial experience was a part of the century and to express it within his painting perhaps adds to the stature of his work in representing that century.

Colin Middleton's own complexity reflects the unique complexity of his time, and the transformations we see in his work reflect the changes that took place in the world during his lifetime, much as his ambition for his art reflected the level of ambition that characterised so much of that time. It is almost forty years since he died and his ashes were scattered on Lough Gartan. As with our understanding of the shape and logic of the last century, it might be argued that, even now, we are still only at the beginning of a better comprehension of Colin Middleton and the art made in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

Colin Middleton has presented an unusual paradox within Irish art. By his early thirties he had become established as one of the leading painters working in Northern Ireland and before his fortieth birthday that reputation had extended to Dublin, where he was one of the most prominent artists exhibiting with the Waddington Galleries and at the Irish Exhibition of Living Art. His work had been included in exhibitions in Europe, America and Australia, and he had a successful ongoing relationship with the Tooth Gallery, one of the best-known commercial galleries in London. Despite setbacks he maintained a high profile throughout the 1960s and 1970s, showing with the leading commercial galleries in Belfast and Dublin as well as being given regular exhibitions by the Arts Council, leading to two retrospective touring exhibitions in 1970 and 1976.

Uniquely within twentieth century Ulster art, Middleton remained a significant figure as groups of artists, writers and administrators emerged and retreated around him. At the age of twenty-four, he designed a print for the catalogue of the Ulster Unit, the province's most notable pre-war modernist grouping. John Hewitt promoted him alongside John Luke as Belfast's major visual artist, and by his mid-thirties he had held solo exhibitions in the city's two major public venues. As a younger group of artists gathered around Victor Waddington, Middleton belatedly joined them and became the central younger artist within the dealer's vision of post-war Irish art. While John Hewitt continued to build his vision of modern Ulster art around Middleton, Dublin writers such as James White began to establish him during the post-years within the articulation of an Irish visual identity.

Middleton seems to have been admired by the artists working around him. Daniel O'Neill wrote in response to an exhibition at Waddington's in 1950 that 'I feel most fortunate to live here in Ireland close to the birth of such magnificent painting'.[582] By the mid-1950s, he was becoming influential for a new generation of Ulster painters, including T.P. Flanagan and Basil Blackshaw, and in the 1960s and 1970s Middleton

[582] Unpublished, undated note from Daniel O'Neill to Colin Middleton, circa October 1950, Private Collection

shaped an entirely new vision of the Ulster landscape, renewing the tradition of Craig with which he had grown up, responding to its specific mood and climate but establishing an analytic abstract approach that is entirely unique and remained highly influential. Throughout his career, despite the variety of work he produced, Middleton maintained a consistent vision of the central aspects of his work, the role of symbolism, the integration of various ideas or themes within a single image, the necessity of engaging with an international modernist dialogue and universal themes without losing the relevance of local lived experience.

But one might also see Middleton's significance in his cultural uniqueness. He trained and worked as a damask designer and he appears to have been unique in Northern Ireland in suggesting an entirely different way in which linen mills could involve designers in their process. Pushing beyond the limitations he found in linen design, he produced remarkable mural designs for a number of contemporary buildings, which must be considered as one of the most radical and progressive achievements within post-war visual culture in Northern Ireland. His experience as an industrial designer and as a practising artist is enlightening to anyone seeking to understand the period, while his achievement as an artist, which I would argue is clearly still underestimated, is likely to secure his place as one of leading cultural figures in twentieth century Northern Ireland.

It is necessary to have a proper understanding of Middleton in his time to have an understanding of the very specific development of art in Northern Ireland during the twentieth century, and to see the separate tradition that evolved here in parallel to both Ireland and Britain.

Yet despite this level of recognition that continued for most of his entire career as a painter and which has, in general, been maintained since his death in 1983, the critical assessment of Middleton has remained uncertain and it has become possible to argue that Irish art history has developed in direction that has perhaps not allowed for an appropriate context in which to analyse his contribution and achievement.

My research has concentrated on two matters that emerge from this. The first aim was to bring together as much accurate material on Middleton as possible, as many of the

misconceptions about Middleton's work have been based on a lack of biographical detail or the impact of the events of his life. This has been achieved through a synthesis of extensive unpublished primary material in a number of archives, with interviews, published material and examination of a large proportion of extant and accessible paintings, drawings and prints by Middleton, creating an original and wide-ranging understanding of his life and his art.

Secondly, it is widely considered that the most problematic aspect of Middleton as an artist, and the barrier to many accepting him as the serious figure that his achievement and broader reputation would suggest he is, has been his changeability, a lack of stylistic and technical consistency that has for some suggested a lack of coherent intent and ambition in his work. This is an extremely complex issue in Middleton's work specifically and within twentieth century art more broadly.

Any understanding of an artist is based to some extent on the control over visibility of their work; what is seen, when it is seen and the manner in which it is presented. The balance of power within this dynamic of control often does not remain with the artist and might instead be with a dealer, a collector or a family member. Control over the visibility and presentation of his own work became an issue for Middleton in the early 1950s and in the thirty-five years since his death it has become even more problematic, contributing enormously to this perceived inconsistency.

Middleton himself and John Hewitt, his close friend and supporter for many years, both contested the relevance of this criticism. Hewitt saw the ability to absorb contemporary voices as a vital feature of the modern artist who has 'left himself open to be alerted to the swiftly succeeding waves of influence', while seeing the identification of specific influences within his work as irrelevant. For Hewitt the influence of other artists was no more important than the influence of contemporary events, or the experience of a place or event, or a memory or idea, within a painting, quoting Middleton's early stated ambition of what he sought to create within his work as an artist, 'a making whole of all that one body may contain'.

Middleton regarded the desire for consistency as to some degree the commodification of works of art through familiarity and the maintenance of recognisable qualities, and

clarified his vision of an artist's relationship to his time in a manner that asserted the relevance of work made at a geographical distance to a particular movement or group of artists, a pre-eminence which has often been automatically granted and which has been used to diminish the work of provincial artists working in contemporary idioms.

> It is accepted that this is one of the most complex periods that the species has ever been through psychologically. And that is why we're getting this unbelievable diversity in styles and so on. But why the heck if a person is aware of this should it not occur in one person instead of one man here and one man there, all working differently at separate little facets of the same thing?[583]

Middleton certainly worked in a range of styles across the five decades of his exhibiting career, but within this are long periods of striking consistency and between these there is often a time during which a clear process of analysis and development takes place that leads to the next distinct phase. It is remarkable how often key biographical details can be connected to these changes; in almost every case there is a purpose to the developments between different periods in Middleton's career. One might argue that some of the meaning in Middleton's work actually lies in its range.

I have argued against the use of his diversity as a valid criticism of Middleton's achievement as an artist and, beyond this, I have provided overarching reasons for his evolution as an artist, which actually demonstrate consistency and coherence, the most crucial being the influence of linen design in both its most specific and its most general applications. It was important that this analysis of material was also rooted in the very specific social, political and cultural situation of Northern Ireland in the early twentieth century. Out of this emerges the central question around which my thesis has been structured, the impact and influence of Middleton's training and career as a linen designer on the development of his work and career as an artist. The dialectic between this identity and the identity as a painter to which he aspired appears to provide a dynamic that shapes these transitions and explains why they were necessary to pursue the enduring aims Middleton had as an artist.

---

[583] 'Talking to Colin Middleton: Interview by Michael Longley, *Irish Times*, 7 April 1967

There were complications in actually defining 'design' in relation to 'art' and I preferred generally to use 'painting' in relation to Middleton. It seemed more practical to apply distinctions that would be more traditionally aligned with Middleton's own perception of the difference between the two, as it does appear to be a distinction that he made. I associated design, for the purposes of separating it from art, as a craft or skill demonstrating a specifically applicable training, a process with its own methodology and visual structures and grammar, emphasising aesthetic satisfaction and harmony.

In *Dimensions of Research* Will G. Hopkins noted that 'unpredictable emergent properties may also be a characteristic of some research projects', that 'flexibility and serendipity are emergent properties of projects based on qualitative methods.'[584]

Although I had based my question on my existing knowledge of Middleton's life and work, there remained possible unpredictability within my research in a number of areas. Chief among these was that while there was a general acceptance of some connection between Middleton's design background and his art, the relationship of these and their impact had not been explored in any depth and it was not something on which Middleton himself had commented publicly in any depth. This dialectic has become central to my writing and has naturally re-asserted itself and informed my research and analysis at significant points, defining a new interpretation of Middleton's work and its development.

Although it has been difficult to locate designs for linen that were made by Middleton, I have been able to identify one of these.[585] Perhaps more significantly I have been able to establish his attitudes towards the linen industry and the process and practice of design through correspondence held in a number of different locations. This has allowed me to place Middleton in a much broader context of artist-designers working in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

My initial hypothesis required a significant biographical basis, to demonstrate that linen design clearly helped to shape Middleton's development and career as an artist

[584] Will G. Hopkins, 'Dimensions of Research', *Sportscience 6*, 2002

[585] This is in the collection of the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum; it carries a Page and Middleton stamp and thanks to the dating by experts at the Linen Centre it is almost certain to have been carried out at the time when Colin Middleton was their main designer.

in certain practical ways. I was also interested in the role of design on the cultural context in which Middleton spent his youth and the early part of his career. To illustrate the effect of design on Middleton's work was perhaps more controlled, as it was possible to draw out its influence from various works. The central challenge of this research, however, was to posit it as an overarching connection, a linking force between the various periods of his painting and one that would actually explain this variety and reveal the underlying consistency of Middleton's vision and ambition as a painter. As he distanced himself from design at certain stages of his life, I have explored other relevant aspects of Middleton's life, while retaining an overall conception of its position at the heart of his creative identity.

It seemed to me extremely difficult to alter a perception of Middleton without addressing the central question of the range of work he produced and the apparent lack of coherence between different groups within it, but once this perception has been deconstructed and an alternative reading of the development of his work has been put in place, it not only alters the sense of significance and purpose within Middleton's work, it also raises questions about the broader critical and historical understanding of Irish art that has developed. A central conclusion that emerged from my analysis of Middleton in the specific context of the social and cultural background of Ulster in the first part of the twentieth century was that this history is key to any understanding of a specific northern artistic tradition at this time.

Middleton's separateness from the accepted canon of Irish art, and the virtual exclusion of many artists working in Northern Ireland during the 1920s and 30s raised questions of national identity directly related to cultural concepts of Northern Ireland both in relation to the Republic of Ireland and also to Britain. The idea of otherness in relation to Northern Ireland also raised ideas around provincialism that are crucial in any analysis of Middleton, as well as of his contemporaries. In certain ways this leads on naturally to the theory of regionalism that John Hewitt evolved during the period when he was closest with Middleton.

In the field of art history, the nature of research is not only to reach the conclusion of particular argument but also to locate the further questions that need to be explored and to identify the additional areas of research that have been opened up. My research

has demonstrated inter-connecting aspects of art and society in early and mid-twentieth century Ulster, which in itself has created a context for analysis in which it seems that the present analysis of twentieth century Irish art is limited in its approach to the Northern Irish tradition. There is a parallel history of Ulster art and an artistic canon that needs to be addressed separately, even though it does at times overlap with an all-Ireland history as well as a British history.

The integration of so many fields of study within my analysis of Middleton was unexpected and this has influenced the outputs of research that have taken place or have been planned. Throughout my PhD I have been able to use my ongoing research in a range of forms, allowing me to crystallise relevant information and analysis on a very particular aspect of Middleton's life and work that has ultimately been beneficial in the writing of my thesis. As well as short notes of several paragraphs written for auction and exhibition catalogues that have concentrated on individual paintings and their context, I have also given talks in Belfast, Bangor and Dublin on different periods of Middleton's work. I have also had the opportunity to introduce various aspects of my research into writing and talks I have given on related topics.

The depth of biographical information compiled and put together within this thesis from numerous sources has enabled the exploration of specific crucial periods of Middleton's life and work in great detail. In establishing certain areas of my research as particularly rich in documentary material I have demonstrated how this can affect critical understanding of Middleton's work. I have had access to primary research material from a variety of archives and sources, which has allowed me to locate related letters within different collections and to compare Middleton's correspondence with various people to assess the reliability and accuracy of statements and accepted fact and to assess the nature and role of these relationships. This has also allowed me to further my analysis of relevant literature and of Middleton's own work as an artist and a poet. This new material has enabled a completely new understanding of Middleton as an artist.

It has been intriguing to pursue other paths that have emerged from my research, whose relevance and outcomes have often been surprising. For example, I have been impressed by the originality of the mural work Middleton carried out for a number of

architects in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In some ways this was the direct engagement with the public that he had always sought, the ability to use art in a transformative manner while remaining wholly practical. It might have been seen as the outworking of the social and political ideals that he expressed in 1943, in the introduction to his first solo exhibition.

Most of these works are in private houses built by Noel Campbell. In addition, murals for an ice cream parlour in Portstewart and a bar in Belfast have both been dismantled some time ago. I have also located a mosaic that Middleton had been commissioned to carry out for a health centre in Newry that was built in the early 1960s. These works demonstrate a mural tradition in Northern Ireland in the post-war period that could with merit be compared to a parallel resurgence in artists working in this area in other parts of Britain. In itself this suggests another aspect of our own cultural legacy that should be examined. More than this, however, I was struck by the interest and engagement with the Newry mosaic that occurred once it was identified and discussed, amongst those who worked in the building, those who had used it in the past and amongst those involved in mapping and securing the city's cultural heritage.

This outcome of my research, renewed public engagement that will also bring about a re-assessment of the modernist tradition of art made in Northern Ireland in the twentieth century and, in particular, an increased awareness of Colin Middleton's centrality within this, will also be a significant part of an exhibition I have begun to plan with the Ulster Museum. This will examine his evolution as an artist within the very specific context of the city in the twentieth century, from his involvement with the linen industry and the broader social, cultural and political impact of industry within Belfast in the early twentieth century, to his return to the city in the 1960s and early 1970s.

This will assert the centrality of Colin Middleton in modern Irish art and in particular twentieth century Ulster art, and will address his unique position as an indicator of artistic progress and the creative environment as well as the broader social transformations of twentieth century Northern Ireland. In placing him so precisely within the context of Belfast at its industrial peak, during wartime and at the very beginning of the Troubles, Middleton's relationship to the world around him is emphasised, which should promote public interest as well as encourage further

research into the unique history of art in Ulster in the first half of the twentieth century. While the exhibition will present many of the findings of my research during this PhD, it should also provide a starting point for much additional research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscript Sources

Colin Middleton Archive (NMNI)

(including extensive correspondence between Colin Middleton and John Middleton Murry, John Hewitt, Bruce Barr, Victor Waddington and others; diaries written by William Giddens and others; extensive collections of poems by Colin Middleton, Kathleen Middleton and Bruce Barr; unpublished essays and notes by Colin Middleton, Kathleen Middleton, Bruce Barr, Sheila Greene and others; accounts with various galleries; exhibition catalogues; various documents.

Colin Middleton Artist File (NMNI)

(including notes on individual paintings; correspondence with the artist regarding paintings)

Colin Middleton Files (IMMA)

(including notes and condition reports on individual paintings; correspondence; various exhibition catalogues and images of works)

John and Roberta Hewitt Archive (PRONI)

(including correspondence between John and Roberta Hewitt and Colin Middleton; correspondence between John Hewitt and Patrick Maybin, and others; Roberta Hewitt's diaries; Roberta Hewitt's notes and accounts regarding Ulster Unit; reviews and articles by John Hewitt)

John Hewitt Archive (UU)

(including draft versions of essays and articles; draft version of *A North Light*)

Privately held papers

(including extensive correspondence between Colin Middleton and Victor Waddington, John Hewitt, John Middleton Murry, Bruce Barr and Maurice Fridberg; unpublished notes by Colin Middleton and Kathleen Middleton; unpublished articles by Bruce Barr and Edwyn Kirkby; gallery accounts; unpublished poems by Colin Middleton; various documents)

Publications

Books

Agar, Eileen, *A Look at My Life*, Methuen, London, 1988

Andersen, Hans Christian (trans. Naomi Lewis), *The Snow Queen*, Penguin, London, 2004

Angelsea, Martyn, *The Royal Ulster Academy of Arts*, RUA, Belfast, 1981

Arnold, Bruce, *A Concise History of Irish* Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977

Arnold Bruce, *Jack Yeats*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998

Barber, Fionna, *Art in Ireland Since 1910*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London, 2013

Bateson, F.W. (ed.), *Selected Poems of William Blake*, Heinemann, 1988

Bayley, Harold, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, Barnes and Noble, Inc., New York, 1952

Beckett, J.C. and Glasscock, R.E. (eds.), *Belfast: Origin and Growth of an Industrial City*, British Broadcasting Corporation, London, 1967

Black, Eileen, *Art in Belfast 1760-1888*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin, 2006

Black, Eileen, and Simpson, M.Lesley, *Art of Down: The Fine Art Collection of Down County Museum*, Down County Museum, Downpatrick, 2011

Bruce, H.J., *H.R. Lilley – Artist and Designer*, Northern Ireland Community Relations Council (undated)

Catto, Mike, *A School of Design for Belfast, 1849-1960*, University of Ulster, Belfast, 2009

Catto, Mike, *Art in Ulster II*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1977

Colvin, Clare, *Paul Nash Book Designs*, The Minories, Colchester, 1982

Compton, Susan (ed.), *British Art in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Movement*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1987

Corbett, David Peters, *The Modernity of English Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997

Cullen, Fintan, *Visual Politics: Representation of Ireland, 1750-1950*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1997

Cullen, Fintan (ed.),*Sources in Irish Art: A Reader*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2000

Depner, Dorothy and Woodward, Guy (eds.), *Irish Culture and Wartime Europe, 1938-48*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015

Eastwood, Carlo (ed.), *Colin Middleton, A Centenary Celebration*, Eastwood Gallery, Belfast, 2000

Fallon, Brian, *Irish Art 1830-1990*, Appletree Press, Belfast, 1994

Frey, Stefan and Helfenstein, Josef (ed.), *Paul Klee Rediscovered*, Merrell Publishers Ltd., London, 2000

Garrett, Albert, *British Wood Engraving of the Twentieth Century: A Personal View*, Scolar Press, London, 1980

Garton, Robin, *British Printmakers 1855-1955*, Garton & Co./ Scolar Press, 1992

Greacen, Robert, *Northern Harvest: An Anthology of Ulster Writing*, Derrick McCord, Belfast, 1944

Harbison, Peter, Potterton, Homan, Sheehy, Jeanne, *Irish Art and Architecture from Prehistory to the Present*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978

Harris, Alexandra, *Romantic Moderns*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2010

Harrod, Tanya, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999

Hewitt, John, *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976

Hewitt, John, *Art in Ulster I*, Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1977

Hewitt, John (ed. Ferguson, White), *A North Light: Twenty-Five Years in a Municipal Gallery*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2013

Jamison, Kenneth, *George Galway McCann 1909-1967*, Belfast, 1968

Johnson, Nevill, *The Other Side of* Six, Academy Press, Dublin, 1984

Johnson, Nevill, *Dublin, The People's City: The Photographs of Nevill Johnson, 1952-53*, Academy Press, Dublin, 1981

Kelly, Liam, *Thinking Long: Contemporary Art in the North of Ireland*, Gandon Editions, Dublin, 1996

Kennedy, S.B., *Irish Art and Modernism 1880-1950*, Irish Academic Press, Queen's University, Belfast, 1991

Knowles, Roderic, *Contemporary Irish Art*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 1982

Larmour, Paul, *The Arts and Crafts Movement in Ireland*, Friar's Bush Press, Dublin, 1992

Larmour, Paul & O'Toole, Shane, *North by Northwest: The Life and Work of Liam McCormick*, Gandon Editions, Dublin, 2008

Longley, Michael, *et al*, *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971

Mairet, Philip, *John Middleton Murry*, Northcote House, 1958

McBrinn, Joseph, *Northern Rhythm: The Art of John Luke (1906-1975)*, NMNI, Belfast, 2012

McCormack, W.J., *Northman – John Hewitt (1907-1987): An Irish writer, his world and his times*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015

McCrum, Sean and Lambert, Gordon (eds.), *Living with Art: David Hendriks*, Wolfhound Press, Dublin, 1985

McConkey, Kenneth, *A Free Spirit – Irish Art 1860-1960*, Antique Collectors' Club and Pyms Gallery, London, 1990

McIntosh, Gillian, *The Force of Culture: Unionist Identities in Twentieth Century Ireland*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1999

Melly, George, *Don't Tell Sybil*, Atlas Press, London, 2013

Müller-Tamm, Pia (ed.), *Henri Matisse: Figure, Color, Space*, Hatje Kantz, Germany, 2005

Murry, John Middleton, *Community Farm*, Peter Nevill, London, 1952

Pevsner, Nikolaus, *The Englishness of English Art*, Penguin, London, 1976

Postan, Alexander, *The Complete Graphic Work of Paul Nash*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1973

Read, Herbert, *Art Now*, Faber, London, 1960

Read, Herbert, *The Meaning of Art*, Penguin, London, 1950

Reed, Christopher, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture and Domesticity*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004

Rewald, Sabine, *The Berggruen Klee Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1988

Roper, Michael and Tosh, John (eds.), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, Routledge, London and New York, 1991

Shone, Richard (ed.), *The Art of Bloomsbury*, Princeton University Press, 2002

Snoddy, Theo, *Dictionary of Irish Artists (Twentieth Century)*, Merlin Press, 1996

Stewart, Ann M., *Irish Art Societies and Sketching Clubs, Index of Exhibitors 1870-1980*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 1997

Steward, James Christian (ed.), *When Time Began to Rant and Rage: Figurative Painting from Twentieth Century Ireland*, Merrell Holberton, London, 1998

Tillyard, Stella, *The Impact of Modernism – The Visual Arts in Edwardian England*, Routledge, London and New York, 1988

Topping, William, (ed. O'Connor, Parkhill), *A Life in Linenopolis: Memoirs of William Topping, Belfast Damask Weaver, 1903-1956*, Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 1992

Tosh, John, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999

Troy, Nancy, *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991

Walker, Dorothy, *Modern Art in Ireland*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1997

White, Eric W., *The Arts Council of Great Britain*, David-Poynter, Ltd., 1975

Willsdon, Clare A.P., *Mural Painting in Britain, 1840-1940: Image and Meaning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000

Woodward, Guy, *Culture, Northern Ireland the Second World War*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015

Articles in Periodicals, Reviews, Collections and Journals

Arts Council of Northern Ireland, *Annual Report*, 1967-68

Anonymous, 'Mainly Personal', *Irish Textile Journal*, Volume 4, Number 7, July 1938, p.8

Beacham, A., 'The Ulster Linen Industry', 1944, *Economica*, Volume 11, Number 44, November 1944, pp.199-209

Beacham, A., 'Post-War Planning in the Ulster Linen Industry', *The Economic Journal*, Volume 55, No.217 (April 1945), pp.114-121

Boos, Florence S., '*The Argument of "The Earthly Paradise"*', Victorian Poetry, Vol.23, No.1, Spring 1985, pp.75-92

Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, *Annual Report*, 1954-55

Coulter, Riann, 'An amazing anthology of modern art': Place, archetype and identity in the art of Colin Middleton', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 2008

Coulter, Riann, 'Landscapes of the Mind', *Irish Arts Review*, Spring 2011

Coulter, Riann, 'John Hewitt, Creating a Canon of Ulster Art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2013

Coulter, Riann, 'The Transmutation of Art into Bread and Butter: Victor Waddington and Irish Art 1943-1957', in *Jack B. Yeats, Old and New Departures*, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2008

Fallon, Brian, 'Irish Painting in the 1950s', *Arts in Ireland*, Vol.4

Fallon, Brian, 'Irish Art and the Postwar Era', *Art Is My Life: A Tribute to James White* (Kennedy, Brian P., ed), National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 1991

Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton', *The Bell*, Volume 4, August 1942

Hewitt, John, 'Painting in Ulster', *Northern Harvest: Anthology of Ulster Writing* (Greacen, Robert, ed.), Derrick McCord, Belfast, 1944

Hewitt, John, 'Under Forty: Some Ulster Artists', *Now in Ulster*, George and Arthur Campbell, Belfast, 1944

Hewitt, John, 'Belfast Art Gallery', *The Studio*, Volume 133, January-June 1947, p.15-24

Holmes, John M., 'Inspiration and the Textile Designer', *Irish Textile Journal*, January 1940, Volume 6, Number 1, p.16

Jamison, Kenneth, 'Painting and Sculpture', *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1971

Larmour, Paul, 'Noel Campbell: Style Master', *Perspective Magazine*, Volume 5, Number 6, July/August 1997, p.18-31

Larmour, Paul, 'Noel Campbell: A Retrospective', *Perspective Magazine*, May-June 2014,

Longley, Michael, 'Colin Middleton', *The Dublin Magazine*, Autumn-Winter 1967

Longley, Michael, 'Colin Middleton', *Intraspect*, No.1, October 1975, p.21-22

Loughnane, Fiona, 'Materialism and idealism: the influence of Salvador Dali on Colin Middleton', *Artefact*, Irish Association of Art Historians, Winter 2008, pp.29-44

Marshall, Catherine, 'Colin Middleton' in *The Hunter Gatherer: The Collection of George and Maura McClelland at the Irish Museum of Modern Art*, 2004

McBrinn, Joseph, 'The Crafts in Twentieth Century Ulster: From Partition to the Festival of Britain', *Ulster Folklife*, volume 51, 2005, p.54-85

Nenadic, Stana, 'Designers in the Nineteenth Century Scottish Fancy Textile Industry', *Journal of Design History*, Volume 27, Issue 2, pp.115-131

Pick, Frank, 'Individuality in Textile Design', *Irish Textile Journal*, March 1940, Volume 6, Number 3, p,23

Sheehy, Edward, 'Colin Middleton', *Envoy*, Volume 2, April 1950

Sheehy, Edward, 'Colin Middleton', *The Studio*, 1954, p.74-77

Stewart, John D., with Middleton, C., *Ulster Farm and Factory*, 1951 Exhibition, Festival of Britain, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Thiessen, G, 'The theological and spiritual in the life and work of Colin Middleton (1910-1983)', *Studies*, Irish Jesuits, Volume 88, Number 350, 1999

Turpin, John, 'The Irish design Reform Movement of the 1960s', *Design History: An Anthology*, Dennis P. Doordan (ed.), MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England, 2000

Walker, Dorothy, *Modern Art in Ireland*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1997

Webb, Norman F., 'The Training of Textile Designers', *Irish Textile Journal*, August 1938, Volume 4, Number 8, p.6-7

White, James, 'Irish Painters of Today', *The Studio*, March 1950

White, James, 'The Visual Arts in Ireland', Blackfriars, February 1951, Volume 32, Issue 371, p.70-74

Woodward, Guy, 'Strange Openings: The Second World War in Paintings by Colin Middleton', *Postgraduate English*, Issue 20, September 2009

Essays in Exhibition Catalogues

Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours from the Studio of the Late Colin Middleton, Christie, Manson and Woods, London, 1985

Coulter, Riann, *The Surreal in Irish Art*, F.E. McWilliam Gallery and Studio, Banbridge, 2011

Dunne, Aidan, 'The Moderns', *The Moderns – The Arts in Ireland from the 1900s to the 1970s*, (Kennedy Christina and Juncosa, Enrique, eds.) Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2010-2011

Ferran, Brian, 'Preface', *Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 1976

Hewitt, John, 'Preface', *Ulster Unit Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, Belfast, 1934

Hewitt, John, *An Exhibition of Recent Paintings by Colin Middleton*, CEMA, Belfast 1945-6

Jamison, Kenneth, 'Colin Middleton', *The Art of Colin Middleton*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Jamison, Kenneth, 'John Hewitt: A Personal Reminiscence', *A Poet's Pictures: A Selection of Work Collected by John Hewitt (1907-1987)*, The Shambles Art Gallery, Hillsborough, 1987

Marshall, Catherine, *Colin Middleton: Paintings and Drawings from the McClelland Collection*, Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, 2001

Marshall, Catherine, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Mooncatcher', *Colin Middleton*, Clos na bhFiodoiri Gallery, Dingle, County Kerry, 2000

Reihill, Karen, *George Campbell and the Belfast Boys*, Adams Auctioneers, Dublin, 2015

Reihill, Karen, *Gerard Dillon, Art and Friendships*, Adams Auctioneers, Dublin, 2013

Sears, David, 'The First Twenty-One Years', *The School of London*, Victor Waddington Galleries, Dublin, March-April 1947

Exhibition reviews and newspaper articles

Arnold, Bruce, 'The Diversity of Colin Middleton' (review of Colin Middleton at Hendriks Gallery, 1968, *Sunday Independent*, December 1968

Belfast Newsletter, 23rd August 1943, 'One-Man Shows'

Belfast Newsletter, 8th September 1943, 'Work of an Ulster Artist'

Belfast Newsletter, 9th September 1954

Belfast Telegraph, Review of Ulster Unit exhibition, 19/12/34

Belfast Telegraph, 8th September 1943, p.2, 'One Man Exhibition'

Belfast Telegraph, December 6th 1945

Belfast Telegraph, 13th September 1954

Belfast Telegraph, '40 Years of Colin Middleton art goes on show', 16 January 1976

Carty, Ciaran, 'He's the Picasso of Irish Painting', *Sunday Independent*, 22 June 1980

Cooke, Harriet, 'Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 25 January 1973

Cooke, Harriet, 'Victor Waddington, the veteran art dealer', *Irish Times*, 26 June 1974

Daily Mail, 3rd September 1943, 'City Helps Artists'

Davey, Anne, 'Middleton of Belfast', *Irish Times*, 1/12/1968

Dublin Magazine, January to March 1951, review of Colin Middleton Exhibition at the Victor Waddington Gallery

Dublin Magazine, July-September 1945, review of Colin Middleton Exhibition at the Grafton Gallery

Dublin Magazine, April-June 1949, Colin Middleton Exhibition, Paintings 1942-49, Victor Waddington Galleries

Dublin Magazine, January-March 1951, review of Colin Middleton Exhibition at the Victor Waddington Galleries

Dublin Magazine, July-September 1953, review of Colin Middleton Exhibition at the Victor Waddington Galleries

Dublin Magazine, October-December 1954, review of Irish Exhibition of Living Art

Dublin Magazine, July-September 1953, Colin Middleton Exhibition at the Victor Waddington Gallery

Fallon, Brian, 'Recent Paintings by Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 3 December 1965

Fallon, Brian, 'Colin Middleton Show at Bank of Ireland', *Irish Times*, 21 August 1985

Gallagher, Raymond, 'Stimulating Middleton Exhibition', *The Irish Press*, 2nd December, 1968

Gillespie, Elgy, 'Embattled Arts 2 - What's the Point of Painting', *Irish Times*, 11 May 1972

Hartigan, Marianne, 'Classical Overtones', *Sunday Times*, 4 February 2001

Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton retrospective show', *Irish Times*, 23 January 1976

Hewitt, John, 'Colin Middleton, An Appreciation', *Irish Times*

Patrick W. Hickey, p.9-10, *The Leader*, March 12th 1949, 'Art'

Ireland, Denis, 'A Belfast Painter', *Irish News*, 13th September 1943

Irish News, 7th September 1943, 'Art'

Irish News, 4 September 1970 (CMM)

Irish Times, 24th May 1945, p.3, 'Two Surrealist Painters'

Irish Times, 25th February 1949, p.3, 'Colin Middleton Exhibition'

Irish Times, 4th March 1949, p.5, 'An Irishman's Diary'

Irish Times, January 10th 1953

Irish Times, September 8th 1954

Irish Times, 8th April 1967

Irish Times, 14th August 1968

Irish Times, 2 December 1968, review of exhibition at Ritchie Hendriks Gallery

Irish Times, 8th May 1971

Irish Times, 2 August 1972

Irish Times, review of Colin Middleton Exhibition at Tom Caldwell Gallery, 2nd February 1970

Irish Times, review of New Year Exhibition at the Ritchie Hendriks Gallery, 10th January 1969

Irish Times, review of New Year Exhibition, David Hendriks Gallery, 10th January 1970

Irish Times correspondent, 'Obituary'

Jamison, Kenneth, 'Exhibition by Colin Middleton', *Belfast Telegraph*, 3rd January 1961

Kinnen, Derek, 'Art', *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 September 1970

Kinnen, Derek, 'Art', *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 October 1971

Longley, Michael (?), Colin Middleton Exhibition at Tom Caldwell Gallery, *Irish Times*, 2 February 1970

Longley, Michael, *Irish Times*, 7 April 1967

MacAvock, Desmond, 'Exhibition by Colin Middleton', *Irish Times*, 9 October 1970

Mills, John ('Fitzmaurice'), 'Art Forum', *The Irish Times*, January 18th 1966

Murphy, Pat, 'Ireland's Greatest Surrealist', *Irish Times*, December 31st 1980

Northern Whig and Newsletter, review of Ulster Unit Exhibition, 18th December 1934, p.8

Northern Whig, 'Variety Keynote at One-Man Art Show', 8th September 1943, p.2

Northern Whig, 29th February 1952

Northern Whig, 5th May 1954

Northern Whig, September 9th 1954

Unity, 2nd October 1943, 'Art in Belfast – Painting', JHH (John Hewitt)

Rosenfield, Ray, 'Middleton exhibition has integrity and skill', *Northern Whig*, 3rd January 1961

'Work of an Ulster Artist – Exhibition at Belfast Art Gallery', uncredited, 1943

Unpublished Articles

Anonymous, *One of the Public to Colin Middleton*, circa 1943

Barr, Lionel Bruce, *The Paintings of Colin Middleton*, 13th May 1945

Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, *Colin Middleton: Notes on the Artist and the Exhibition*, 1943

Greene Sheila, 'Colin Middleton, Painter', draft for *Art News and Review*

Greene, Sheila, *Meet the Middletons* (draft, possibly unpublished)

Middleton, Colin, *Note on One Man Exhibition*, Belfast Museum and Art Gallery, 1943

Interviews

Bell, Nelson, interview with the author, 6 July 2016

Breakey, John, interview with the author, 5 April 2018

Caldwell, Chris, interview with the author, 15 July 2016

Kennedy, S.B., interview with the author, 11 August 2017

Longley, Michael, 'Talking to Colin Middleton'*, Irish Times*, 7 April 1967

Mallie, Eamon, unpublished interview with Colin Middleton, 1983

Mrs Jane Middleton Giddens, interview with the author, 2 September 2016

Mrs Shelagh Parkes, interview with the author, 23 August 2016

Unpublished PhD thesis

McVeigh, Emma, *Regionalism, modernism and identity: Sculpture in Northern Ireland, 1921-51*, Ulster University, 2013